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The South African Government this week announced the abolition of the hated "Pass Laws". These are a network of statutes and regulations which controlled the lives and families of millions of Black South Africans. Hundreds of thousands were arrested and jailed annually for "pass" offences.

The "Pass Laws" broke up families (a man could not take his wife and children with him when he found work in the cities) and made technical criminals of ordinary people looking for work. The whole purpose of the "Pass Laws" was to control the influx of Black people to the major metropolitan areas, (which for decades were seen as part of "White South Africa" according to Government ideology) and to encourage Blacks to remain in their "own" (Homeland) areas which constitutes approximately 13% of the total land area of South Africa.

Black influx control was seen as a basic part of the Government's overall policy of Separate Development according to which different Black Tribal Groups and to a lesser extent the minority Asian and Coloured (Mulatto) groups would be segregated away from Whites to live out their political, social and, (initially), economic aspirations in separate geographic areas. The "Pass Laws" together with other racist laws such as the Population Registration Act (which classifies every person at birth according to race), and the Group Areas Act (which allocates urban land for residential purposes according to race), etc., formed the legal infrastructure on which the Government could pursue its policies of Apartheid and Separate Development.

What is the significance of scrapping the Pass Laws ?

Is it cosmetic or is it really significant ? No, it is not cosmetic. It is important on two levels : one abstract, the other concrete. On the abstract level it is yet another symptom of the Government having to abandon both the ideology and goal of Apartheid or Separate Development. the "grand plan" is busting apart at the seams. On the concrete level it certainly alleviates hardship for many thousands of Black migrant workers and their families.

It is inconcievable to the unaware how these people were harassed, persecuted and demoralised by this supremely evil system of human manipulation. Squatter communities were razed in the dead of winter, men were forced to live in degrading single quarters away from their families for eleven months of the year, whereupon they were obliged to go back to the rural areas so as not to qualify for permanent status in the urban areas. It would be sanguine to shrug the shoulders and say, "so what" to the "Pass Laws" being abolished for these people.

But before one gets too flushed with excitement about this "significant act of reform", it is well to pause for a moment and remind oneself that the "Pass Laws" were but one of an armoury of Apartheid measures. The Pass Laws prohibited freedom of movement from rural to urban areas, but in the urban areas freedom of association is still prohibited on a wide range of activities.

For example, the Apartheid laws still classify people according to race, allocates them to racially determined residential areas where community facilities such as schools, welfare, transport, housing stand out as officially created symbols of racial deprivation.

To abolish the pass laws without abolishing these other racist instruments begs the question : Why now the Pass Laws ? Why not all other discriminatory laws? I believe it is because the Government is slowly and painfully, under internal and external pressure, jettisoning Apartheid measures without being prepared to accept the alternative consequences which must flow from it : the end of White political domination and the inevitability of non-racial political participation in Government.

That is why each haphazard, eclectic measure of "reform" initiated by Government is simply going to generate demands for more reform until the last vestige of institutionalized Apartheid, i.e. White political domination, succumbs as well. The abolition of the "Pass Laws" is obviously a good thing. However, in the absence of other abolitions of statutory racism, it is going to mean for the short term that hundreds of thousands of Blacks have greater mobility to move from rural wastelands to urban ghettos to fend for themselves. And right now in those Black urban ghettos the mood is not in favour of bit-by-bit uncertain reform, but for fundamental and large-scale social change. It is against this mood that the significance of abolishing influx control or the "Pass laws" will have to be assessed as well.