

(Second of Two Articles for the Rand Daily Mail on the Germany Conference)

IS DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT POSSIBLE IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES?

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South Africa has been overwhelmed with analyses promising bloodshed and violence and five-minutes-to-midnight scenarios have been cheaper by the dozen. Yet, compared to countries like Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Sudan and the West Bank, the level and scale of violence in South Africa has been quite low. This is not to deny that the potential for violence on a vast scale is not always present or that there is a fierce degree of coercion and persecution. But it remains a fact that compared to these countries, we have been relatively peaceful. What struck me at the workshop was that it was precisely the academics who came from the most strife-torn and violent societies who displayed the greatest concern and urgency for solutions which would promote inter-group accommodation and bargaining. It was almost as if the experience of what violence can do to tear apart a society prompted them to search even more seriously for non-violent alternatives. It is a terrible thought that we here in South Africa will first have to experience civil violence and disruption on a sufficiently high scale to persuade the various groups to search in all seriousness for non-violent compromises. May we be spared this because there is no doubt that violence has an extremely brutalizing effect on particularly the youth in divided societies.

An attempt on my part to summarize the conditions under which a non-violent accommodation of conflict in divided societies is more rather than less likely, comes up with the following :

- Any attempt to unilaterally impose involuntary group association heightens the possibility of violence and inter-group violence. In other words, no person should be forced against his/her will to belong to a religious, racial or ethnic group for the purpose of political participation because this is counter-productive.
- When groups voluntarily manifest their separate religious, cultural, ethnic and racial cohesion it is important that the respective groups recognize the legitimacy of the existence of the other groups as well as their interests.
- Bargaining and negotiating must be seen as an acceptable way to reach political compromises.
- The rights and legitimacy of recognized and accepted leaders to bargain on behalf of their constituents has to be accepted.
- The untenability of group domination as well as discrimination on an ethnic, racial and/or religious basis has to be common cause amongst the groups.

All these conditions have to do with creating a political culture of accommodation and compromise in the society rather than one of confrontation and unresolvable conflict. It is fairly generally accepted that simple first-past-the-post majoritarian politics tends to increase the possibility of conflict and breakdown in the political system and techniques such as separation and decentralization of political power, proportional representation and concurrent majorities are more successful.

Whatever the political conditions, it is abundantly clear that they must be accompanied by fundamental social and economic changes which have the potential for eradicating inter-group inequalities based purely on religious, racial or ethnic grounds. This does not imply an enforced egalitarianism but an opening up of the social and economic system which will allow individual mobility on merit and not on the basis of ascribed characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity or sex. However, the manner in which this opening-up is going to come about will be more the result of political bargaining and successful articulation of demands rather than dominated groups waiting on the altruistic and voluntary change of hearts of the dominant group. Therefore there has to be an interaction between political conflict resolution and social and economic reform - the one without the other increases frustration and a sense of negative discrimination.

One of the most remarkable conclusions reached by the academics at the workshop was that their research showed that education was a very unpredictable and often counter-productive mechanism to



bring about political reconciliation and accommodation. In short, their research showed that it is not really possible to teach a child not to be prejudiced towards members of other groups. In fact there was a positive correlation between individual self-esteem and lack of prejudice. The less self-esteem the individual has, the more likely he/she is to seek group protection and to be prejudiced towards other groups. The lesson seems to be that if you want to reduce prejudice and negative feelings towards other groups, teach the individual to be self-confident rather than sermonize. Another equally interesting finding in the field of education was that any attempt by the dominant group to impose the "right" kind of education on minorities or subjected groups usually has the opposite effect. Thus, the Israelification of Arabs in Israel stimulates Arab Nationalism and aggression and the ethnification of Black education in South Africa stimulates Black Consciousness and demands for "unity and liberation". The answer seems to be to increase autonomy in education rather than state centralization.

These academics delivered stimulating and controversial papers at the workshop in Freiburg. Obviously one does not agree with everything they said, nor do they among themselves. But I came away intellectually invigorated by the freshness of their analyses and struck by their commitment to finding non-violent solutions to the problems of violence and democracy in divided societies. Absent was the supposed "dispassionate objectivity" of the positivists and the dogmatic confidence of the intellectual ideologues. They were committed but critically reflective

because their intellectual experiences had convinced them that peaceful accommodation in divided societies can only come about if the point of view of the other is taken seriously and accommodated in the political system. One sensed that their research was opening up a new political laboratory which could contribute to our understanding of how diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups could live together with reasonable democratic stability. Indeed a laboratory which all South Africans should participate in if evolutionary and non-violent change is their serious concern.

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