

**WITS BUSINESS SCHOOL and  
SOUTH AFRICA INTERNATIONAL**

**SOUTH AFRICA AND THE WORLD  
In THE NINETIES**

**Dr F van Zyl Slabbert**  
**4 April 1990**

If we cast our minds back to this time last year when President PW Botha was still in control and the total onslaught was still in place, South Africans will perhaps realize that the current political scenario provides more interesting grounds for complaint than previously. Two questions that merit consideration are, firstly: what motivated President De Klerk's actions, and secondly: can a democracy be negotiated in South Africa?

In addressing these topics, it is helpful to refer to what can be termed the political 'mantra' that commenced in 1985 and that was given formal expression on 20 July by Schultz of the Reagan administration, and later by the visit to South Africa of the Eminent Persons Group. This group that represented the highest international initiative to date, gave currency to the view starting to be articulated by the ANC and most of the organisations to the left of center of government, namely: that the way to solve South Africa's problems was to unban banned organizations; release political prisoners; dismantle Apartheid structures and open negotiations. This view gained particular momentum in August 1989 when the ANC succeeded in having their Harare Declaration accepted by the Organization of African Unity, the non-aligned movement and, subject to a few amendments, the General Assembly of the United Nations. The Harare Declaration was simply a more detailed spelling out of what was implied by the mantra, i.e. demands to unban banned organisations, dismantle Apartheid, release political prisoners and negotiate, together with demands for the lifting of the state of emergency, the return of exiles and the ending of political trials.

This then describes the political climate that FW De Klerk inherited when he assumed office in August 1989. In a sense one could argue that at the time, the ANC held the initiative and high ground on how South Africa could extricate itself from the stalemate. Then, the thrust of the debate was blunted by the impossibility of negotiating with leaders who were incarcerated, together with a widely held view of the impossibility of the South African regime – after forty years in power – seriously engaging the demands of the ANC. However, with the accession to power of FW De Klerk, it immediately became apparent that a fundamental shift was taking place which was reflected by the release of some political prisoners, the relaxation of conditions for holding meetings; and a revision of instructions on how the police were to mediate in demonstrations, that together signaled a future direction. It was in this inarticulated manner that President De Klerk began to pick the eyes out of the Harare Declaration, while simultaneously denying that it had any relevance to his actions. This was his method of locking into the strategy

adopted by the ANC as well as other domestic and international organisations on how to resolve the South Africa dilemma and open up new political space.

Certainly, there existed a sound and reasonable compilation of factors that reinforced the view of the untenability of white domination in South Africa: the more relaxed relationship between the USA and USSR which led to a particular view on regional conflict that was reflected by the ending of the conflict in Namibia; the escalating costs for South Africa of the Angolan war; the financial drain on South Africa of administering Namibia; the need for foreign investment and domestic turbulence. But most incisive of all, was the ability of someone who was able to interpret and respond coherently to these circumstances. Such acuity was embodied in FW De Klerk, who had the required courage and personal conviction, which now imbues members of his cabinet and caucus, who have themselves reported having experienced a personal liberation.

These then are the motives underlying the initiatives of the state president. But what essentially were the processes being set in motion? His stand essentially revealed that negotiation was the mode or process that was going to be adopted to implement two principles: firstly to negotiate away white minority domination including his own position of power; and secondly, to negotiate a democracy in its place. There is perhaps with hindsight, a consensus that obviously this was the way to go, but such a stance detracts from the lack of such a precedent in the annals of history. The fact is that white minority domination has never been negotiated away by those in power, and never before has a democracy been negotiated in its place by the people themselves: the major parties to the conflicts in Namibia and Zimbabwe neither negotiated with each other about the process of change, nor negotiated about the package to be followed. The resolution in Namibia detracts from such a view only in the sense that after the constituent assembly had been elected, a commission was appointed to formulate a constitution, but the actual process was largely the responsibility of outsiders, i.e. Lord Soames in Zimbabwe, and "Lord" Pienaar in Namibia. In fact, South Africa became the constitutional midwife to a new Namibian society. Essentially, due to the ambiguous nature of sovereignty in Zimbabwe and Namibia, the international community could find a legitimate pretext for intervening to spell out quite concretely the programme for change. The process in South Africa is dissimilar: after more than 40 years of Apartheid, the transition process will not be bought cheaply. The process of negotiating a democracy in the place of domination does not happen automatically. Intolerant criticism leveled at current actors should take cognizance of the events of the last 40 years and the complexity of the issues that have faced the country. Nobody should be surprised by the outbreaks of unrest and violence: there are no historical precedents that create a set of rules to diminish the confusion. However, to gain some coherence in the confusing pattern of politics in the present situation, there are some analogies to consider where minority regimes and authoritarian structures eased the conditions of their own domination and created new political space, allowing new groups as well as opponents to enter that space and begin to bargain. We can cite Latin American societies, southern Europe, Spain and Portugal as examples of societies that have moved from dictatorships towards uncertain democratic outcomes. In spite of the pendulum effect between open and closed conditions, there was at least an interaction in the new political space. A glance at events in Eastern Europe since

October last year further provides examples of how minority regimes create new political space in spite of not being quite sure of what to do with that space in attempts to change the government.

O'Donnell et al draw useful distinctions between two phases of the process of opening up new political space. The first phase is called the phase of liberalization, whereby rights previously denied are given to organisations and individuals; a process whereby organisations are unbanned; political prisoners are released; oppressive structures are dismantled and exiles are permitted to return. Many countries, along with South Africa, have followed this route. In this liberalization phase, there are a set of problems that differ from those relating to the second or democratization phase, which is seen as a process whereby groups or organisations – previous excluded from political decision making, are in some way or other pulled into such processes. Such groups or organisations do not move into new political space without bringing with them their own histories, grievances, retributions, desires and policy preferences – all of which impact on the future style of political decision making. Far from having reached the phase of democratization, South Africa currently finds itself at the beginning of the phase of liberalization; the use of the term “normalization” by President De Klerk in his 2 February speech to describe the political process being initiated, was in indication of measures being instituted that make it possible for anybody who wishes to participate in a peaceful process of politics to do so legitimately and legally. The initial steps towards normalization said FW De Klerk such as unbanning banned organisations and releasing Nelson Mandela would be followed by further measures towards normalization to be determined in future discussions with opponents of the regime. His announcements without exception took everybody by surprise, not least the ANC. De Klerk was thus in a position to anticipate and position himself in relation to the subsequent wide-ranging confusion: an advantage that was denied his opponents. An indication of the measure by which the ANC was caught off its guard is evidenced by a seminar held at Oxford University in October 1989, that was attended by some ANC students who, when challenged to indicate their organization's real world response to the possibility of such a normalization process, could be forgiven their amused dismissal of such an event. It is important to recognize that the ANC is a liberation movement, formed in response to repression that spans decades and reached its apotheosis under the Botha regime's total onslaught/total strategy approach, and that had accordingly geared itself to a long hard revolutionary battle in the conventional sense of the word, in which there was no alternative to a war of attrition, whereby the ANC's four pillar strategy of international isolation: the armed struggle, underground structures and mass mobilization would lead to the day when the South African state would collapse and it could seize power. This was the legend that informed the political actions of ANC members whether they were located in Um'khonto we Sizwe, the diplomatic mission or underground structures within the country. Such a leadership direction was formulated to gear activists to the long hard struggle ahead, the eventual success of which was reinforced by massive international support from Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and the sympathetic European community.

FW De Klerk's 2 February initiative threw the anti-Apartheid fronts into disarray: overnight the ANC had to move from being a movement of liberation in exile, to that of a political party in domestic politics, gearing themselves for negotiation, while having to accept that instead of working towards the collapse of the South African state, they now instead would have to participate in the joint management of moving the state towards a non-racial democracy to which De Klerk has committed the government. Such a metamorphosis does not happen overnight.

The reality is that the ANC leadership faces the enormous task of modifying the reactions of groups such as post-1976 cadres – men who have spent a decade and a half in the bush preparing for the armed struggle and who have witnessed the death of friends – to the unexpected path to negotiation. There is no magic formula to assist them in managing such a complex adjustment, together with the discontent and confusion that such a new direction unleashes. Given the difficulties of such an adjustment and its accommodation within their own movement, it is unrealistic to expect ANC spokesmen to be in a position to articulate unambiguous policy responses on every issue confronting the organization. This view should not be interpreted as a plea to condone injunctions to throw weapons into the sea that are accompanied by contradictory commitments to the armed struggle; rather it is a plea for an understanding of the problems that cause such confusion. It is however, not only the ANC, PAC and SACP and all other movements that have survived political repression, that are wrestling with a steep learning curve: the idea of the National Party moving in the direction of becoming a non-racial party will also introduce uneven levels of adjustment. In the case of the Democratic Party, the adjustment to such progress – the fact that the National Party has taken over its policies – has resulted in nothing less than a crisis of relevance.

Also characteristic of the process of liberalization, are the disguised political fault lines that bubble to the surface: within ANC ranks during the period of struggle, the desire for liberation and the intensity of commitment against the regime transcended all fault lines that will now surface in conflicts between rural and urban interests; liberal and socialist; and Stalinist and Gorbachev ideology. Certainly, Sam Motsuenyane, Chairman of the National African Council for Commerce, cannot have the same preference for political policy as Cyril Ramaphosa of COSATU. The process of liberation gives expression to a natural division of political interests that can take up to three to four years to surface. Such divisions need not have resulted in antagonism or violence and democratic ways can be found of mediating differences that follow the same pattern of compromise as does the process of negotiation towards democracy, as both processes of resolving policy preferences can be channeled through competitive politics.

O'Donnell et al further argue that the period of liberalization is often characterized by a clamp down that results from the risk of opening up new political space. They refer to a repression/tolerance calculus: if the costs of tolerance outweigh the costs of repression there will be a clamp down. There was a mild clamp down in South Africa on 2 April, signaling a generalized need for stabilization that was cautiously welcomed by Mandela; more enthusiastically welcomed by Mangosuthu Buthelezi; and accepted with 'understanding' by the international community. Facing turbulence and cries of

capitulation from the right, and cries of collaboration from the left, there is little alternative than for the government to attempt to stabilize the situation. In a sense, until the process moves from general talks about talks to actual bargaining, the risks are greater for De Klerk as he is hemorrhaging to the right within the confines of white party politics, whose actions are geared at derailing the process. The right wing however, is not a monolithic entity; alongside the 'bush rambos' of the lunatic fringe are the genuine white 'homelanders' or partitioners, the latter whose views should be negotiable provided that they are put on the table as the 'sacrificial partition' proposal of Carel Boshoff, who is now willing to settle for Namaqualand and a section south of Namibia, rather than the 'greedy partition' style of Verwoerd. The third category of right wingers are scared whites – not necessarily lower middle class blue-collar workers – who live in the plush northern suburbs, of whom only those with transferable skills and finance have the emigration option. I nevertheless believe that many scared whites can be wooed back into the process; that 'homeland' whites can be pulled into the negotiation; and that the lunatic fringe can be isolated, as must be the fate of radical outbidders on the extreme left. Such a process presupposes a level of stabilization beyond the threshold where a clamp down seems preferable. Such liberalization signals a move across a certain threshold towards democratization, and the inclusion of groups previously excluded from the process of decision making. Democratization presupposes at the least, that the major groups are sufficiently confident about their support, mandates and leadership, and that they can responsibly enter the bargaining process. There is no reason why South Africa should not reach this phase, although time frames could stretch from six months to six years. In Romania and the German Democratic Republic, it has taken a breathtakingly short space of time that has generated high levels of confusion. There, elections have already been held, but the level of crisis remains high. That the general process in South Africa is heading the same way is ground for optimism, with international pressure on all sides willing the process to stay on track. The anti-Apartheid movements and organisations are committed to this kind of process, while acknowledging that they have to deal with temporary difficulties.

Although democratization includes a general election, a new government and the transfer of power, the implementation of a democratized constitution is possibly the least of the difficulties of establishing a democracy. I have never believed that it is difficult to write a democratic constitution for even the most conflict-ridden societies. Democratizing a constitution is perhaps the easiest task of all. Three other aspects of democratization do however, merit attention.

Firstly, democratizing the state is a major challenge, as the shift towards negotiation from both the government and the ANC implies that both have to sacrifice the conventional view of the South African state. Afrikaner nationalism has for decades assumed that the South African state was simply an extension of Afrikaner national interests, reflected by the homeland policy being a direct result of having to create separate states for other groups. De Klerk has now determined that the South African state will have to be hared. In contrast, the dominant view within the ANC is that the state is simply an extension of white capitalist interest and therefore irreconcilable with the interests of the majority or working class, and must thus be destroyed. Both views reflect a perception of the South

African state which holds that the interests that it serves are irreconcilable with that of its opponents. This has now changed, at least at leadership level; Mandela admits that the state is not going to collapse. Slovo in his article "Has Socialism Failed?" also admits that the state is not going to collapse. As the state will play a role in the transition process, it is therefore important to find ways of democratizing the state to allow for the process of joint management through the transition.

This wrestling process of jointly managing such a transition would be characterized by negotiations between bodies such as Ciskei, Transkei, Bophutatswana, Venda, the nine homeland areas together with Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi of KwaZulu and organized state labour, coming together with policy makers in government departments such as defence, security, intelligence, telecommunications and finance, to discuss measures of how to move away from old-style white domination. In such a process business would be well advised to consider how state structures, such as pensions can be shared. Such a transition would determine the fate of the civil service and perhaps finally explode the myth (that persists with remarkable disinterest in South Africa) that the civil service is a disinterested party serving the government of the day. Nevertheless, after 40 years of Apartheid government, white civil servants are likely to demonstrate a remarkable flexibility with regard to the government they serve, given the vital factor that there is no tampering with pensions. This applied in Namibia; it also applied in Zimbabwe where one of the toughest bargaining issues in the Lancaster House negotiations concerned pensions of civil servants. Should the liberal free market view of the state gain ground, the diminishing role of the state with regard to the increase in individual liberty and freedom would assist in the process of a move away from the Apartheid state. Again, in spite of such a trend not being seen as squaring with reality, there are strategically placed individuals in the business sector of society who are in a position to lobby the government not only on issues such as monopolies, but on the existing levels of state control of the economy, together with calls for further nationalization that are being advanced to meet the demands for a more equitable distribution of wealth. Although further nationalization can only fail to deliver, the issue will have to be confronted.

Democratization of the budget is the second challenge confronting the transition process that would probably take the route of the appointment by both the regime and its opponents of a commission of inquiry. The Minister of Finance himself concurs that the budget is undemocratic.

The democratization of the economy is the third area of challenge, that hopefully would extend to tripartite discussions between business, labour and government. Here, the real challenge would be to find new ways and means of extending the spread of participation in the economy while moving it away from the current white capital/black labour polarization, without destroying the freemarket system.

Looming over all the foregoing processes, is the problem of the absence of a referee, external arbiter or court of appeal to mediate conflicting claims: here, there may be a case for the appointment of some kind of dispassionate, disinterested 'council of wise men'

that could reflect the political predispositions of the different parties, and which would have a collective responsibility for ensuring that the process stays on track.

With the opening of the beginning phases of liberalization everybody will be called upon to make a positive contribution to advancing these political debates. An obvious pitfall is the danger of public opinion becoming locked into the pendulum of despair and optimism which can be avoided by focusing on the progress of the general process that will be reinforced by the real desire of the international community to ensure the success of the negotiation process, away from disintegration, collapse and violence. It is perhaps the will of the major players and particularly the will of their supporters, that will be crucial to the success of negotiating a democracy.