

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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TRANSITIONAL TERMINOLOGICAL TRIBULATIONS

Change generates its own vocabulary; South Africa is no exception. We use different words to express more or less the same idea; more often than not, the same word is used to talk about different ideas. Political opponents stake out claims and stalk each other publicly with hidden agendas that everybody knows about, and disguise obvious ideological preferences with verbal posturing, calculated to promote themselves as the most attractive partners in the process of negotiated transition. The big point is not to appear ignorant or unconfident even if the vast majority of people have no idea what you are talking about, or exactly what is happening.

It would be comforting, even nice, if for example, the government in power and their opponents to the left and right, displayed some humility; confessed some ignorance and took the country into their confidence about the complexity of the process of change they have unleashed on us. Instead, the PAC assures us that "the toiling masses demand a Constituent Assembly now!"; whilst the ANC claims that "the same masses are prepared to do it in stages with just an "All Party Conference", then an "interim Government" and then a Constituent Assembly election. The Government says it should be blindingly obvious to everyone that you cannot have Constituent Assembly elections or an Interim Government before there have been a number of Multi-Party Conferences and these may show that neither of the other two may be necessary. Right wing organisations and parties proclaim that all this is a lot of cock and bull and that South Africa consists of a plurality of struggling nationalities battling for self-determination and that partition is the only solution. Nobody seems inclined to gently pry open the lips of the pony and actually count the teeth.

The first thing to keep in mind is that nobody, including the super confident prominent spokesmen, know how the process of transition is going to work out. This is an obvious but very important point to keep in mind. If we did know, there would be no confusion or anxiety about what is happening. Some talk as if we are in a process of colonial transition which will end in a flag-down-flag-up ceremony to mark our new found state of Post-Apartheid grace - no chance; others still expect a revolutionary transition with a sudden transfer of power from an old regime

to a new one - even less chance. Still others talk the language of painless Co-optive Incorporation without sacrificing significant control - pure fiction. Finally, some actually talk about re-imposing old fashioned Verwoerdian Separate Development - uncontrolled delusion.

The second point to keep in mind is that despite the confusion, there is a national consensus on two fundamental issues : Domination in whatever form is unacceptable and negotiation is the manner in which an alternative should be found. All significant parties declare themselves in favour of this from left and right. There are fringe flanking elements who favour militancy and radicalism but they are in the minority.

The third point is that despite this national consensus there is a fundamental division on what to negotiate about. A minority of whites who may be strategically located in the economy and the civil service wish to negotiate a form of partition. The majority, (also the majority of whites) wish to negotiate some form of a non-racial democracy. Within the minority who wish to negotiate partition one can distinguish between greedy partitionists and sacrificial partitionists. Greedy partitionists wish to negotiate a substantial piece of South Africa which they believe is historically theirs, e.g. AWB and the Boer Republics or reimpose old style Verwoerdian Separate Developments, e.g. Ferdie Hartzenberg and his supporters in the CP. Sacrificial partitionists wish to negotiate either a small part of South Africa for the Afrikaner, e.g. Prof Carel Boshoff

and Oranje Werkersbond or a variation of Communal Self-Determination on a neighbourhood/regional basis, e.g. Koos van der Merwe and his supporters in the CP. Sacrificial partitionists show an increasing willingness to sit around the same table with those who wish to negotiate a non-racial democracy and put their own case for sacrificial partition.

Those who wish to negotiate a non-racial democracy agree on at least three fundamental problems that have to be addressed in the process of transition, but there is no general consensus on the mechanisms in terms of which to do so. These problems are :

(i) Transitional legitimacy : (i.e. How can we be sure that we understand each other in the process of negotiation and be reasonably confident our constituencies will follow us.) The mechanisms that the Government in power and the ANC, DP, Inkatha and Trade Unions favour is an All or Multi-Party Conference. Such a conference will have to decide on which issues have to be dealt with on the agenda of transition. Three prominent initial issues will surely be -

(a) Who monitors the process

(b) Who maintains non-partisan stability (i.e. law and order)

(c) What is the status of the incumbent regime relative to its negotiating partners.

(ii) Responsibility for Managing Transition (i.e. how do the incumbent regime and its negotiating partners share responsibility for administration and government whilst negotiating a final outcome). This is where the concept of an Interim Government figures strongly. Again the government in power and the ANC, DP, Inkatha and Unions generally are agreed on this.

(iii) How to test Popular Legitimacy for the Final Outcome (i.e. How do we find out what popular backing there is for what has been negotiated). This is where the idea of a Constituent Assembly or a National Referendum figures. The ANC, PAC and Unions strongly favour this whereas the Government and Inkatha tend to favour a referendum.

In fact, once the process has unfolded to this point, either one will serve the purpose.

The fourth point to remember is that because there is no flag-down-flag-up ceremony to signal a regime change in transition, the problem of transfer of sovereignty from an incumbent-regime-to-interim-government-to-a-final-democratically-elected-government will remain an enduring dilemma. Quite probably what one will see happening is a number of Multi-party Conferences leading to Multi-Party Commissions of Inquiry into various government functions, e.g. Health, Housing, Security, Education etc. From these will emerge policy recommendations and

personalities that will form the infra-structure of an interim-type-government. The Tri-Cameral Parliament with its Executive President will increasingly defer decisions until it receives recommendations from the Interim Government, (a de facto transfer of interim sovereignty). There may even be an interim referendum to mandate an Interim Government to continue with its work until it has successfully negotiated a final outcome which hopefully will be a non-racial democracy. These final proposals can then be put to a final popular test.

The fifth and final point to remember is that given our history, ideological differences, racial/cultural/ethnic diversity as well as our declining/stagnant socio-economic situation, we have a high propensity for transitional violence which will pose severe challenges to stability and the even flow of the process of negotiated transition. The probability of a number of clampdowns before and if we reach a final outcome must constantly be kept in mind.

In short, South Africa's quest for democracy is not as easy as some pretend, nor as futile as others predict. We have the potential for it, but certainly also a demonstrable capacity to squander it. Let us encourage those who have the ability to prevent this not to sit on their hands.