

## SOUTH AFRICAN FOUNDATION

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IDASA AND OPPOSITION POLITICS

"Left" and "Right" mean something special in the South African political vocabulary. If a movement, party or individual is against White Domination, Partition, Legislative Racism, Compulsory Group Membership, the word "left-wing" comes in to play; if a movement, party or individual is against the vote for all adults in one undivided country, freedom of association and the abolition of all racially discriminatory laws, the word "right-wing" applies. Left and right do not necessarily reflect the economic policies of a movement, party or individual in the South African context. It reflects an attitude towards race and ethnicity and the nature of participation in the political system. Against this background the words radical, moderate and reactionary acquire their own meaning as well. They all bear on the tempo and quality of change. If change away from racial domination has to be dramatic, quick, unconventional then the demand is for radical change; if change has to be controlled, planned and slow, the demand is for moderate change; any resistance to moving away from racial domination at all is regarded as reactionary.

This initial concern for conceptual clarity before talking about opposition politics in general is necessary for two reasons. The first is to make the point that one cannot attach the usual European meanings to the words "right, left, radical, moderate and reactionary", without spreading (and becoming the victim of) confusion in the South African context. There the words bear more on the kind of economic system that should prevail and the strategies for bringing it about. It is highly unlikely that a conventional liberal-democrat, committed to free enterprise and the Rule of Law would ever be called "left-wing" and certainly not "radical" in Europe, whereas in South Africa such a person could easily be called both. The second reason is to make a general statement about opposition politics in South Africa at the moment : Opposition politics is being shaped by the dynamics of right-wing reaction and left-wing revolt and either is a consequence of the dynamics of reform initiated by the State. In other words, the prospects for opposition politics have to be understood in terms of the Dynamics of Reaction-Reform-Revolt. (The word "Dynamics" is not used to obfuscate, it simply refers to the interaction of individuals and interest groups who use resources in order to resist or promote reform.)

The essence of Reform is the idea that those who are not classified white by the Population Registration Act can be constitutionally co-opted into one nation-state without immediately sacrificing white control over the State. The essence of right-wing reaction is that such sacrifice is inevitable in the long run if Reform is pursued and is totally

unacceptable. The essence of left-wing Revolt is that Reform adjusts White Domination and does not eliminate it and is therefore unacceptable, both in the short and the long term. Left-wing revolt varies from moderate to radical and is both Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary. As a matter of fact the majority of those who revolt have no constitutional access to Parliament. At present the State is trying to co-opt them in some other way. Only those who react to reform from the right have access to Parliament in such a way that they can change the Government through the electoral process in the foreseeable future. This is a statement of probability not of principle. In principle a left-wing white party could get the majority and become the Government, but the probability is extremely remote. Herein lies the "threat" of the right; the "impotence" of the Parliamentary left and the "dilemma" of those who are in power at present. The response of the State to this dilemma is to move between repression and reform and depending on the measure in which it does either, alienate both the right and the left. It has partially succeeded however, in presenting itself as the moderate centre in white politics battling against both right and left "extremism".

Extra-Parliamentary opposition to those in power, (involving the vast majority of people in the country) operate under a somewhat different set of conditions. The more moderate it wishes to be, the less available and/or credible are the channels through which it can be so. The more radical it becomes, the more vulnerable it

is to the repressive measures of the State. In addition, the State has deliberately fostered the idea that extra-Parliamentary means "unconstitutional", "illegal" or "subversive", whilst most extra-Parliamentary organisations have virtually institutionalised a tradition of non-participation in the constitutional structures created by the State. The result is that left-wing Parliamentary opposition has institutional/constitutional protection with potential strategic leverage for change, but declining support, whereas extra-Parliamentary left-wing opposition has growing support, declining strategic leverage and almost no institutional/constitutional protection. Within white politics, however, right-wing opposition has increasing support, growing strategic leverage with complete institutional/constitutional protection. Parliamentary opposition politics has become the hostage to right-wing growth, extra-Parliamentary opposition is becoming the victim of a strategic deadlock.

Given this environment nurtured by the dynamics of reaction-reform-revolt, it is futile for a white Parliamentary party on the left to try and re-invent the wheel, i.e. to start from scratch building up enough electoral support to unseat the Government of the day and then change matters to favour the aspirations of the majority. And it borders on the obscene to extol the mystical idea of "Parliamentary" politics as an end in itself, which if only sufficient respect is shown to it, will somehow rectify the totalitarian excesses of those who govern. To do this, with what we call parliament in South Africa, is

tantamount to tarding up an old hag and parading her in front of unwilling customers. It is far better to assess the institution which parades as Parliament in South Africa for its strategic potential, than for its intrinsic merit. Therefore, any left-wing party in Parliament which pretends towards bringing about change and not just protesting against injustice (a valid pre-occupation in its own right), has to seek support, co-operation or at least prevent opposition from extra-Parliamentary left-wing forces or else die on the vine, or even worse, simply be a decorative extension of the constitutional machinations of those who govern. At the same time, those dominant organisations in extra-Parliamentary opposition will have to come to terms with the reality of power politics and be far more flexible on strategy if they wish to influence the course of events.

Is it possible for those in opposition on the left to suspend differences of strategy and seek consensus on matters of principle? One such principle is Democracy. The idea of Democratic government being the preferred one for South Africa is a theme shared in common by almost all left-wing opposition groups, whether in Parliament or outside. Do they have the same thing in mind? If not, where and why do they differ? Having established differences and common interests can they then reconsider on strategy and short term objectives? These are the questions which led to the formation of IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa). Within the spectrum of Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary opposition IDASA arranges

workshops, seminars, conferences and projects aimed primarily at whites who wish to explore the possibility of a non-racial democratic alternative with those who find themselves in extra-Parliamentary opposition, either by force or by choice. Obviously some of its actions will be labelled "radical" or "unconstitutional" by the State, not because IDASA is remotely either, but simply because the State defines it as such. It seems to be part of the unavoidable risk of getting a debate going on democracy that traverses the spectrum of extra-Parliamentary and Parliamentary opposition. Running this risk seems the least that is necessary for all those who are serious about promoting democracy in South Africa and unlocking opposition from the cycle of reaction-reform-revolt.