

ARTICLE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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By calling for a Convention Alliance to be formed, I am not calling for a National Convention tomorrow. Under the present circumstances it would serve no purpose at all.

What are the present circumstances ?

- We have a declared State of Emergency in 36 Magisterial Districts and endemic unrest in townships inside and outside those districts. To the outside world the media presents us as a large black township surrounded by white security forces. Inside the country we are bludgeoned with rumours, counter-rumours, postures and declamations as police run around townships shooting and hitting in an attempt to get at those who burn, loot and throw stones. In the process the innocent and the guilty are treated in exactly the same way. In other words, this is the worst possible climate to call a National Convention.

- But not only is the climate wrong, the very structure of our society is wrong. What is the point of calling a Convention if the Government persists with aspects of influx control, denies voluntary association by means of the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, ignores the fundamentals of rudimentary civil liberties through detention without trial, bannings, etc. One cannot expect credible or representative leaders to come to a convention and negotiate on behalf of their constituents when such a structure continues to exist in our country.

- The wrong climate and structure is responsible for the situation where people do not have the opportunity to freely demonstrate who the leaders are that they want to go to a Convention to represent their interests. For decades the Government has created structures, particularly in urban townships, that cannot generate leaders to bargain effectively on behalf of their constituents.
  
- Finally, a Convention can only be called by the Government of the day and this Government certainly has not displayed any intention to do so in the climate they have created, the structures they maintain and the leaders they are prepared to allow to come forward and talk to.

For all these reasons, it would be pointless to call a National Convention immediately. But it certainly is not pointless to form a Convention Alliance. Such an alliance could be a visible demonstration to the Government and the world that there are significant organizations, movements, parties or individuals who, although they may differ strategically or even in terms of policies and principles for a post-Apartheid South Africa, are committed to the same central theme: One Constitution based on one Citizenship, in One Country which must be negotiated at a Convention. Such an Alliance by its very existence will make the point right throughout this ravaged time we move through, that either we negotiate an acceptable constitution for a new South Africa, or we all suffer through repression and counter-violence in the old one.

Of course there are people detained and in jail who should be part of such an alliance. But that should not prevent those of us who are free to form one. By doing so we can give tangible evidence that we do not believe a new constitution can be created on the present structures of South Africa.

An alliance of this kind is also not a ganging up against the Government. It is not a protest group or single issue confrontation. It can be a demonstration to the Government that there is another way out of the cycle of repression and violence in which we are trapped. It shows the Government an option which it itself has to be part of in order to succeed. It says to Government : "You must create the climate and circumstances for a Convention to be possible."

Such an Alliance certainly does not compromise any party, organization or individual on its role or function outside of the alliance. We do not even have to like one another in order to belong to it, although it would obviously help. The essence of a convention is precisely that those who differ strongly negotiate about their differences. An Alliance can demonstrate the support in our land for such negotiations despite our cleavages, hostilities and differences.

What can a Convention Alliance do once it is formed? How will it work? It would be totally presumptuous of me to speak on behalf of such an Alliance as those who form it will have to decide on its agenda and programme of action.

However I do have some idea of the actions that such an Alliance could be involved in. For example :-

It could set up a Secretariat to co-ordinate its activities country-wide.

It immediately facilitates communication between its members on a nation-wide basis. In this way misunderstandings can be cleared up and collective attitudes can be established on current and future events.

It could structure constitutional debate and allow its member organizations to discuss the differences that exist between them. It could organize rallies and arrange nation-wide petitions to either encourage or discourage Government on a particular course of action.

It could regionalize alliance activities. The problems in Kwa-Zulu Natal are of a different order in some respects than those of Eastern and Western Cape. Keeping at all times in mind the theme of the Alliance of One Constitution, One Citizenship, One Country, these regional differences can be brought under sharper focus. There can even be a Convention Hall in Cape Town sitting when Parliament does discussing the same agenda as Parliament and showing the Government what the members of the Alliance think of the affairs of State.

It could provide the country and the outside world with a systematic well thought out agenda on how Apartheid can be dismantled as quickly as possible.

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Of course these are just suggestions and they can obviously be improved upon.

Let me make it quite clear to members of the UDF, ANC and others who have rejected this Convention Alliance out of hand. I suggest it not to create some artificial alliance between Inkatha, myself and the Government. On the very day they accused me of this, Government supporting newspapers accused me of seeking extra-Parliamentary action. I did not suggest it because I have delusions of grandeur about "taking over leadership" or "filling a gap left by others."

I suggest it because our country is polarizing at a rate of knots between two simplistic and vicious options : brutal repression on the one side and brutal revolt on the other. Both depend on and use violence to either maintain or change the status quo and they feed on each other. In a country such as ours neither can be controlled by any single group or individual to achieve its aims. It is pure fantasy and dangerous romanticism to think that brutal violence can be an orderly instrument to restore law and order or to work through revolutionary hidden agendas. The only visible consequence will be savagery and killing on a scale that will brutalize the future for all of us. That is why a Convention Alliance could demonstrate that rationality can still be mobilized to be of some political consequence in our fractured land. If churches, universities, business, unions and parties cannot be mobilized to do so, then history will show that those who could, were either wringing their hands or sitting on them whilst the profiteers of violence held the day.