Policy impact of democracy in South Africa

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Introduction

This article will explore a few dimensions of the causal relationship between policy choices by political actors and institutional development in South Africa. Larry Diamond has argued the issue as follows:

"...political leadership - both of individual government and party leaders, and of political leaders conflicting and conciliating as a group - can make a difference both to the success and failure of democratic development. But the extent of that difference depends not only on the qualities of leadership, but on the nature of the social, economic, cultural, and political conditions in which it operates. Moreover - and this is the most crucial linkage that is often missed - those conditions themselves are not just given: they are significantly the product of the policies, choices and decisions of previous generations of leaders."  

Unlike Diamond, who analysed different types of leadership and their implications for a comparative study, I will devote attention here to certain societal constraints in South Africa as well as to certain policy choices open to political actors that will substantially influence the (possible) development of democracy there. This will therefore be an exercise in institutional policy analysis, undertaking a tentative, qualitative assessment of certain potential consequences of the pending regime change in South Africa.2

After the events of the preceding eighteen months in South Africa, it appears to be only a matter of time before a new inclusive democratic system of black majority rule is established there. This assumption, however, is a dangerous oversimplification of the present position in South Africa. Diverse (potential and real) demographic, political, cultural, social and economic constraints complicate the achievement of this objective. It is quite possible that the first post-apartheid government, which may initially be more representative and legitimate than its immediate predecessor, may quickly deteriorate into a system as authoritarian and repressive as the system it replaces. Experience in other parts of the world confirms this assessment. These conclusions have profound policy implications for any post-apartheid government in South Africa, irrespective of its composition.

My article will briefly identify the crucial forces that will probably determine the outcome and assess the impact that several different policies to deal with these forces will have on the nature of future political institutions and processes in South Africa. An analytical focus will be used, not a descriptive approach to the subject matter.

Policy choices in democratic transitions

The study of political transitions to democracy is fast becoming a growth industry. It was triggered by an excellent exploratory study in theory building by O'Donnell and Schmitter, followed by analyses by equally eminent scholars such as Diamond, Linz and Lipset, Higley and Burton, and a number of others.3 The political domino effect of democratic transition that started in Southern Europe with the unexpected collapse of the authoritarian Portuguese regime in 1974 and quickly spread to South America, Central America, Eastern Europe and now Southern Africa, will probably be keeping students of democracy occupied for years to come.

Central to all these analyses is the important role attributed to political leaders and the deliberate policy choices they make to enter into vital agreements with one another during the transition process. The importance of this political phenomenon was also confirmed by my personal participation in (and subsequent assessment of) the initiation of recent political change in South Africa.4

Although political "leaders" (Diamond) or "élites" (Higley and Burton) must take mass preferences and interests into consideration, these issues:

...constitute parameters within which elites can safely and effectively act. These parameters normally leave elites a
range of choices, and the choices they make tend to be decisive for political outcomes.3

In the transition literature, institutional political change to democracy is normally initiated by such relatively autonomous political elites.4 For a number of reasons (of which personal ambition, interest and survival frequently make up a substantial part), they normally decide to bury the hatchet (literally in the South African situation), and to enter into one or more negotiated settlements, pacts or agreements aimed at ending violent conflict and replacing it with a new political arrangement. These pacts do not always guarantee a democratic system. And attempts at settlement may break down, depending on the participants’ commitment to a negotiated resolution of the existing dispute and their willingness to compromise. In the last resort, the determining factor is always to be found in the policy choices exercised by the negotiating partners, influenced by various intervening societal and psychological variables as perceived by the parties concerned.2

Recent political developments in South Africa

Colonial occupation of the southern-most tip of the African continent occurred as early as 1652, when the Dutch East India Company established a permanent provisioning depot on the site where Cape Town later developed.8 Since that moment – three-and-a-half centuries ago – the descendants of these European settlers, supplemented by immigrants mainly of British, French, German and Portuguese descent, have dominated this region in all respects, despite the fact that they today constitute only 12 per cent of the inhabitants.

As in other similar situations, European intrusion established a colonial rule that sparked off the protracted conflict being waged to this day in South Africa, earning the country the dubious distinction of being, probably, the last isolated individual right-wing terrorists continue.

De Klerk has not made up his own mind as to which strategy he wishes to pursue. On one hand he wants to retain for himself and the NP as much political influence as possible in any post-apartheid government. This would probably necessitate an alliance of some sort with the ANC/SACP as the major political force in a new South Africa.

On the other hand, being a staunch anti-communist and a devout and fundamentalist Calvinist Christian, De Klerk finds the idea of associating himself with the SAPC unacceptable. This is also the predominant view of his party, which in decades of propaganda has equated the avowedly atheist SAPC with the Antichrist and Satan. De Klerk’s attempts to persuade the de facto leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, to break the alliance between the ANC and the SAPC have so far failed. Mandela has proved fiercely loyal to his old friends and allies, as well as to his increasingly controversial wife, Winnie.

This situation has forced De Klerk to look towards another political actor for assistance, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, powerful leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), political vehicle for the largest and most aggressive ethnic group in the country, the Zulus. The Zulus today total approximately 8.5 million people compared with the Xhosas (the ethnic group dominating the ANC to which Mandela and most of the senior members of the ANC belong), with approximately 6.9 million members and the white racial community of 5 million members (approximately 2.5 million Afrikaners and 2.5 million other members chiefly speaking English, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Greek, Italian, and French).

Buthelezi is a professed Anglican, free-market supporter and political moderate compared to the more radical ANC/SACP leaders. The Zulus, however, are politically split between the IFP and the ANC/SACP. This weakens Buthelezi’s power base. Buthelezi is also for a number of reasons persona non grata with many influential ANC leaders, although he has been a friend of Mandela himself for a long time. These facts, together with a history of ethnic competition between Zulus and Xhosas for scarce resources, diminish the prospects of an alliance between Buthelezi and the ANC/SACP.

The beginnings of a trend of closer co-operation between De Klerk and Buthelezi (and concomitantly between the NP and the IFP) in opposition to the ANC/SACP can be perceived as a result of these forces. An important manifestation of this trend is the not so
subtle bias of the South African Police and Defence Force in favour of the IFP in the increasingly frequent incidents of urban violence in black townships resulting from the political power struggle between the IFP and ANC/SACP alliance. As a result of these developments, De Klerk's early political honeymoon with the ANC is something of the past.

A legal organization for only seventeen months, after being banned for thirty years, the ANC is finding it exceedingly difficult to organize itself as a streamlined political movement and exercise control over its supporters. It has not yet succeeded in transforming itself from a revolutionary resistance movement into a recognized party and part of the country's political establishment. It has become notorious for an administration in disarray, with telephones that are not answered, messages that are not delivered and appointments that are made and then just ignored. Its membership drive has attracted fewer members than expected.

The ANC also suffers from internal power struggles among a number of "Young Turks" in the organization who are all in the race to succeed an ageing and frail leadership. Thirty years underground has had an unhappy effect on the cohesion of the organization. At least five powerful interest groups currently compete for dominance in the ANC. They are the present Robben Island prison leadership cadre who were released in February 1990 and work closely with the second group, the Lusaka-based external wing of the organization; the SACP; the trades unions; and the United Democratic Front (UDF), founded as an internal front in the days when the ANC was still banned. The trades union federations and the UDF have since acquired a life of their own, independent of the ANC, chiefly because the Robben Island leaders have so far failed to integrate UDF and trades union leaders fully into national and regional ANC executive structures.

There are a number of reasons why the ANC finds it difficult to bring these local civic organizations, trades unions and other interest groups, which had a field day inside the country while the ANC was still a banned organization operating from outside South Africa's borders, fully into its influence sphere. Plans are in an advanced stage to replace the UDF with another, more legitimate non-partisan umbrella organization to co-ordinate all these bodies in order to establish a vibrant and independent civil society. This will certainly further undermine the ANC's attempts to consolidate political control, but will stimulate free democratic organization and a spirit of lively enterprise in civil society.11

The reason for the decision to replace the UDF with another non-partisan organization is to be found in the continuing political enmity between the ANC and the PAC, a result of the PAC's splitting away from the ANC in 1959 through its rejection of the Freedom Charter of 1955, still the ANC's political credo. The UDF also accepted the Freedom Charter as an operating framework when it was established on 20 August 1983. The PAC rejects the Freedom Charter principally because of its non-racial character. The PAC's strongly African socialist ideology accords a more important role to Africans than to whites in the struggle for a new South Africa.

During April 1991 the ANC and the PAC agreed to work seriously towards a settlement of their differences; but in practice the ideological gap looms large. The PAC still refuses to formally end its armed struggle and embrace a negotiated settlement with the NP before all remaining discriminatory legislation has been repealed, before the NP has made a commitment to return all land taken away from blacks, and before they have accepted the principle of an elected Constituent Assembly as negotiating forum.12

Negotiations between the NP and the ANC have recently stalled on the issue of certain remaining political prisoners, exiles not granted amnesty, the refusal of the NP to accept the principle of an elected constitutional assembly and an interim government to oversee the process of transformation to a new South Africa, and the refusal of the NP to ban the carrying of spears (as traditional weapons) by Zulus.

The inability of the ANC to persuade the NP to accede to its requests, and the delays in achieving constructive results from negotiations, have caused many youth members of the ANC to defect to the PAC, which has a more hard-line policy. This further undermines the authority and status of the ANC as the chief liberation movement in South Africa.

Real negotiations on the principal political issues have, therefore, not yet started. South Africa finds itself in what is sometimes called the preparatory phase of negotiations.

Policy implications of demographic constraints

The racial and ethnic composition of the South African population is an important fact in the political debate. The total population of approximately 39.5 million, including the residents of what have been known as the self-governing and "independent" homelands, is constituted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30 289 000</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5 031 000</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>3 245 000</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>961 000</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39 526 000</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross-cutting language and cultural cleavages further complicate the demographic situation in the country. Table 2 summarizes these language cleavages. There are no less than 24 different home languages, of which eight are spoken by ethnic groups with more than 1 million members each.

The relatively small-minority status of the white community (12.7 per cent of the total population), linked to its high level of development and strong economic position because of the policy of apartheid, have caused strong feelings of apprehension and fear among members of that community of the consequences for them of black majority rule. These emotions are strengthened by the unfavourable record, as white South Africans see it, of black governments' treatment of white settler communities in the former Belgian Congo, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe and so forth. This has persuaded De Klerk to strongly emphasize the need for statutory guarantees of minority rights and the establishment of a federal-type government with a two-chamber legislature of which one chamber would be constituted on a community basis, with a weak national government, and with stronger regional and local governments. Although the
ANC has already agreed to the principle of a bill of rights and minority guarantees, it has so far resisted pressures for a federal-type system from fear that it might lead to a perpetuation of apartheid and therefore white privilege.

The relatively small size of the white community and its history of total domination may, however, just entice the ANC to ignore these white fears. This may increase the possibility of a reactionary white backlash and complicate the negotiations process and the implementation of its eventual outcome. If a substantial number of whites refuse to face the challenge, whether the state of the economy will allow it; and whether there will be a sufficiently innovative entrepreneurial class and skilled work-force to generate surpluses for redistribution, or sufficient international investment and assistance to make possible such a vast project.

If inequalities between the different communities cannot be remedied, however, the chances of a stable democracy in South Africa are slim.

South Africa's present economic position does not offer encouragement for large-scale spending sprees on redistributive action:
- Its 1991 budget was R85 bn (approximately US$34 bn at the current exchange rate of US$1=R2.80) with a deficit before borrowing of R10.1 bn (3.4 per cent of GDP).
- It grapples with a foreign debt of R50 bn.
- 1990 saw a real economic growth rate of -0.9 per cent in the GDP of R132.4 bn and -3.1 per cent in the GDE of R119.5 bn. The expected growth rate in GDP for 1991 is slightly better at R132 bn (-0.27 per cent) while an improved 1992 projection is estimated at R134.4 bn (1.83 per cent). The expected changes in the GDE for these periods are a change of R119.3 bn (-0.15 per cent) for 1991 and R121 bn (1.43 per cent) for 1992.
- The 1990 import figure of R33.9 bn represents a growth of -3.07 per cent over the previous year. The expected changes for 1991 and 1992 are R34.3 bn (1.32 per cent) and R35.1 bn (2.26 per cent) respectively. The corresponding export figures are R46.7 bn for 1990 (3.41 per cent), R47 bn (0.57 per cent) for 1991 and R48.5 bn (3.15 per cent) for 1992.
- A positive foreign trade balance of R1.7 bn existed in February 1991.
- South Africa's gold and foreign reserves (1991) are worth R6.9 bn.
- The prime interest rate at the end of 1990 was 21 per cent, estimated to drop to 18 per cent at the end of 1991.
- Inflation, measured by the annual rate of increase in the consumer price index, is expected to fall from 13.5 per cent during 1990 to 12.36 per cent at the end of 1991 but will probably rise again in 1992 to 12.86 per cent.
- The rise in wage levels for 1990 was 15.8 per cent while the projected changes for 1991 and 1992 are still below the inflation rate – 11.2 per cent and 13.12 per cent respectively.
- The officially estimated unemployment figures for 1988 (excluding that for whites which was minimal), were: blacks, 13 per cent of the economically active black population (823 000); Indians, 8 per cent (26 000); and coloureds, 8 per cent (92 000). Employment figures grew 0.3 per cent in 1990 but are estimated to grow by 4.08 per cent in 1991 and grow again slightly by 0.10 per cent in 1992. According to one estimate 450 000 new jobs are needed every year over the next 13 years in order to provide sufficient jobs for everybody. This would necessitate a massive annual growth rate of 5.6 per cent every year over this period – a goal clearly impossible to achieve.
- There is a housing backlog of 2.2 million units at present, mainly for blacks in urban areas. In addition to this backlog, it is estimated that an additional 240 000 homes must be provided each year until the year 2000 in order to meet future demands resulting from expected population increases. This is a huge and probably impossible demand – triple the current rate of 70 000 to 80 000 new dwellings per year.
- Educational inequalities. Government schools are still organized on a
In 1989, 26 per cent of the available places in white schools were not filled (307 000 out of 1 180 000). Simultaneously there was a shortage of 60 000 places for children in black primary schools and 99 500 places in black secondary schools.28

- In 1988 the state's per capita expenditure on school education outside the homelands was: whites, R2 722; coloureds, R1 507; Indians, R2 014; and blacks, R595.29
- The pupil/teacher ratios in 1988 (excluding some homelands) were: white, 16 to 1; Indian, 20 to 1; coloured, 25 to 1; and black, 41 to 1.30
- Black school-leavers in 1987 totalled 718 000, of whom 63 per cent left primary school.31
- In 1988 the five Afrikaans-language universities had a black student enrolment of 3 per cent (1 800 out of 63 700 students) while the traditionally English language universities had an enrolment of 10 per cent black, 5 per cent coloured and 6 per cent Indian students, in all approximately 8 000 out of 40 000 students.32

In 1989 per capita expenditures on pensions for the different races were as follows: whites, R218; Indians, R167; Coloureds, R167; and blacks R117 per month.33

- If literacy is defined as basic reading, writing and computing skills and an elementary knowledge of the physical and social environment (approximately a primary school education – 7 years' education), then 90 per cent of South Africa's white population of 5 million people of 13 years and over are literate. This must be compared with 85 per cent of the Indian community of 1 million, 70 per cent of the coloured community of 2.5 million people and only 48 per cent of the black community of approximately 18 million people living in the urban and immediately surrounding rural areas of the country.34 This 48 per cent figure excludes the notorious rural homelands, where the situation is much worse.

A seriously complicating fact relevant to the future economic position of the country is the ANC's declared economic policy, which is strongly socialist and distribution-oriented to the detriment of economic growth. The nationalization of mines, banks and industries is still an official policy objective, subject to the ANC's being offered acceptable alternative proposals strong enough to persuade its leaders that sufficient finances for redistributive purposes can be generated in other ways. The ANC also plans an increase in the role of the public sector in South African society. Judging by experience in other societies, this increase in state intervention will prejudice lasting democracy in the country because it will still further weaken the economy.35

It has not been my intention to assess the socio-economic status of South Africa here but to draw certain conclusions from the situation as it is.

Policy implications of political constraints

Democracy in the Third World

The record of democracy in the Third World, especially in Africa, is not good.36 The single-party state is the most favoured model of government, although the domino effect of socialism's collapse in other parts of the world has had a beneficial impact on Africa and the rest of the developing world. Nevertheless, authoritarian government in Africa is the norm. Where democratic governments do appear, they are unitary in nature (examples are Botswana and Namibia). The record of federal models of government in the Third World is even worse.

The key question is this: Can societal forces in developing countries cope with the intricacies of democracy -- and especially federalism? Another way to frame the same question is to ask: Does an appropriate value system conducive to democracy -- and especially federalism -- exist? Or can it develop and prevail within a reasonable time in the society concerned? Such a value system as we are enquiring about must include a high degree of tolerance for specific interest groups, and for regions that want autonomy to solve problems in their own way, not the tendency to ram some uniform approach down peoples' throats willy-nilly.

This question is especially acute in developing societies. And it is doubtful whether ideal-type federal systems can in the medium- to long-run be transplanted successfully into such societies. The reason for this rather dramatic statement is the plain fact that federalism operates with a low degree of success in the Soviet Union, Brazil, Nigeria and India; and failed some years ago in colonial Central Africa.

Complex democratic political systems designed on the basis of the theory and principles of extreme non-centralization or decentralization (federalism or devolution), are implemented differently in different developing countries: strong and effective central control is exercised over all subsystems in various direct or indirect ways (a state of emergency in India, military governments in Nigeria and Brazil and the ideology of communism in the Soviet Union).37

The central problem is illustrated by the following comments from an Indian judge in 1977 on the Indian experience of federalism:

The extent of federalism is largely watered down by the needs of progress and development of a country which had to be nationally integrated; politically and economically co-ordinated; and socially, intellectually and spiritually uplifted. In such a system, the States cannot stand in the way of legitimate and comprehensively planned development of the country in the manner dictated by the Central Government.38

Federalism, with its delicate balance of power between diversity and unity, is a very sophisticated form of government. Even in industrial democracies where the discrepancies between rich and poor are not as pronounced as in developing countries, the federal balance is difficult to maintain (example: Canada). In younger countries, what is more, nation-building objectives are regarded as more important than the entrenchment of minority rights. In fact, minority rights are regarded as obstacles to effective nation building (example: Zimbabwe). In South Africa, nation building has already been accepted by all significant political interest groups as an urgent priority.

Conclusion: unless a number of obstacles can be effectively overcome, the prospects for successful federal regionalism are not very good in most Third World countries, suffering as they do from many of the constraints we have listed.

Federalism is not the only model of geographical autonomy that may be applicable to South Africa. One can think of several other types of regional autonomy, using a wide range of constitutional mechanisms.
There is, for example, not much difference between strong “federal” governments, such as those of Nigeria and India, and a weak unitary government that is effectively decentralized – as we see in Spain. In both instances effective minority rights enforcement would provide sufficient protection for minorities who presently fear domination and suppression. The geographical decentralization of decision making and policy implementation within a unitary system to regions that want such autonomy is an important and potentially successful conflict-regulating mechanism. The introduction of this type of autonomy must be seriously considered where feasible.

Another important point to bear in mind in establishing a new constitutional order is that it always proceeds by trial and error until a relatively stable system has developed appropriate to local circumstances and the effective balancing of opposing interests. A federal system is by nature very rigid. Its very strength may simultaneously be a fatal weakness that may make it impossible to change if the need for change should arise. In extreme cases it may allow small minority groups to veto the wishes of the majority. This flaw inter alia contributed to the failure of the Lebanese and Cypriot experiments in constitutional engineering. Political systems in developing states must therefore be flexible in order to be able to change shape when needed without endangering the position of their minorities.

A last point: the economies of most Third World countries are in a desperate state, with hyperinflation and huge debts that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be repaid. This, linked to a weak world economy, fast deteriorating into a worldwide depression as a result inter alia contributed to the failure of the Lebanese and Cypriot experiments in constitutional engineering. Political systems in developing states must therefore be flexible in order to be able to change shape when needed without endangering the position of their minorities.

Authoritarian political cultures
Both the ruling NP and the resistance movements in South Africa have strong authoritarian political cultures. The NP governed the country for years as a white minority party that refused to acknowledge the right of the majority of blacks to equal political rights. Even within the party, NP leaders have a strong and authoritarian stranglehold on policy making.

The party is supposed to consist of a federation of four provincial parties linked by an advisory Main Council. In practice, the Council rules by making binding policy decisions, which are later ratified by the annual provincial congresses. Although policy is supposed to be made by the provincial congresses of the NP, the leaders of the party, those who make up the Cabinet, are in fact relatively autonomous élites who decide upon policy themselves and have their proposals only legitimized/rubber-stamped at the provincial congresses. In the past, these congresses have been well stage-managed, with virtually no spontaneous participation and all discussion points prepared (in writing) well in advance. The last series of congresses saw a deviation from this pattern in the direction of a more open and democratic discussion of issues. Nevertheless, the party’s leaders largely control the agenda and the contents of all contributions made during such congresses.

In this respect the ANC is not much different. As recently as eighteen months ago it was still a devoted Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. One can observe the traumatic effects of the collapse of socialism in other parts of the world on the intellectual élites within the ANC/SACP – and also those in the PAC – in their agonizing analyses of what went wrong, and why it need not happen in a socialist South Africa, in the pages of radical local journals such as Transformation and Work in Progress.

Despite the rhetoric of being based on popular participation and democratic action, the ANC consists of street and area committees that are frequently self-appointed, self-perpetuating and self-coopting bodies. The level of political sophistication of their members and supporters is minimal in certain instances, and the organization has a reputation for its intimidation of members and of the public at large in order to secure compliance with the directives of the frequently self-appointed leaders (the “comrades”). This frequently results in people being rounded up in the streets and on buses and trains to attend mass gatherings such as meetings, funerals, protests and so on and so forth. This is routinely accompanied by the commandeering by the comrades of public and private vehicles for this purpose. It is clear that the ANC leadership does not have full control over its members and supporters at grass-roots level.

Another illustration of the authoritarian nature of decision making in the ANC is the fact that virtually all invitations to individual leaders in the organization to present a public address had to be referred at one time to the top policy-making body of the organization, the National Executive Committee – until the burden of work resulting from this practice became unbearable. There were incredible administrative delays in merely trying to secure an appointment of this nature with an ANC official. One of South Africa’s most eminent writers, a member of the ANC who served a prison term for conspiring against the state, Breyten Breytenbach, recently expressed his extreme disappointment with what he termed the “Stalinist roots” underlying the ANC’s organizational culture.40

Authoritarian cultures are also largely characteristic of other organizations such as the CP, the PAC and, especially, the IFP. The only political party that really conforms to democratic practices is the small and basically all-white Democratic Party.

These authoritarian traditions in the country’s principal political movements make one sceptical of all the democratic rhetoric spouted by them so routinely. It places a question mark behind the democratic nature of post-apartheid government in South Africa.

Forces facilitating democratic development
Despite all the obstacles on the road to democracy in South Africa summarized above, there are also forces facilitating the move towards more democratic government of the country. The rest of this article will be devoted to a discussion of the most important variables here.

Relatively strong economic infrastructure
Despite all the headaches summarized earlier, South Africa is one of the strongest Third World countries. It has well-developed agricultural, manufacturing,
distributing, mining and military sectors, with relatively effective and efficient economic and technological capabilities and with basic infrastructures that compare very favourably with most other Third World states. It can be argued that South Africa is in fact the strongest power in Africa and also one of the strongest in the Third World. The comparative world development indicators compiled by the World Bank confirm this assessment.

What this national strength means is that, given the adoption and implementation of appropriate government policies, South Africa will be in a better position than many other developing countries to achieve that minimal level of economic growth that is a prerequisite for an effective and stable redistribution of resources. This will make it easier to address the serious material inequalities inherent in the South African economy, which in turn will enhance prospects for a more durable democratic system in the longer term. It does not mean that the problems of economics and finance foreseen earlier will not materialize. They will, however, pale into relative insignificance when set beside similar problems in many other Third World countries.

Developing cultures of moderation and tolerance

Despite the ANC/SACP’s ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism and the NP’s history of authoritarianism and centralized decision making in South Africa, it is apparently becoming clearer to both of these actors that they will have to tolerate each other and moderate their own policies within a multiparty democratic system in order to achieve a compromise in the negotiating process.

The collapse of socialism in the rest of the world has made it difficult for adherents of that philosophy in South Africa to explain why it should succeed there. It has even resulted (inter alia) in spokespersons for the ANC denying that the organization ever propagated socialist (or even authoritarian) policies. The international demise of socialism has thus already stimulated some reflection in the minds of those who will probably be members of the new policy elites in South Africa. It will facilitate the development of effective multiparty democracy by pressuring political actors into policy modes that acknowledge the primacy of participatory planning and regular and free elections controlling political elites at the ballot box.

One of a number of possible illustrations of this development is to be found in the positions these élites are adopting on multiparty democracy, a bill of individual rights, minority safeguards and regionalism. Here, the current debate on the unitary or federal nature of the new political system for the country is of interest.

Federalism is not a concept new to South Africa. It was considered as an option for the new state in 1910, but lost out against the perceived merits of a unitary model for nation building among the four disparate colonies. The result was that four relatively autonomous provinces were established within the Union of South Africa.

Until 1987 the governing National Party consistently and vehemently rejected the federal concept. Today, the NP is in favour of a federal-type model in which are embedded effective minority guarantees.

The most detailed proposal yet for a federal model in South Africa came in 1987 from the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba. After a long wait, the NP has accepted the principles of this proposal. The African National Congress, however, still rejects federalism because it is seen to be an attempt to retain the privileged position of whites – thereby obstructing the aim of redistribution – and to be detrimental to the job of nation building (the same argument that sank it in 1910). It has, however, accepted the principle of regional administrations with autonomous powers.

Now as argued earlier, experience so far with federalism in developing countries is not encouraging for its future in South Africa. This, however, does not exclude a federal-type regional model, adopted in order to achieve and reconcile goals such as economic growth, development, political self-determination, grass-roots democracy, ethnic conflict regulation and so on. Rondinelli and Nellis have found that a decentralization of governmental power and functions to regional and local levels in Third World societies is an important instrument of development.

These arguments all point inevitably to a strongly decentralized unitary state rather than a well-entrenched and rigid federal balance of power for South Africa – even in the face of existing opposition to such steps by the leading political resistance movements. Such a system may evolve over time into a more pronounced federal state, or even in the opposite direction, depending upon quite a number of different considerations. Constitutional mechanisms – such as an optimum delimitation of wards or constituencies and the use of multi-member constituencies linked to transferable-vote electoral systems – would facilitate this type of guaranteed representation on a non-racial basis.

This model will probably address the crucial issues of minority guarantees and decentralized government favoured by the NP as well as the overarching need of the ANC for a strong central government in order to effect nation building and a redistribution of resources. It is, in any event, doubtful whether there is any difference in practice between an effectively decentralized unitary system and a federal system in which the balance of powers is tilted towards the federal government.

The increasing moderation of the principal actors is further illustrated in the following section.

No feasible alternative to a negotiated settlement

Negotiations can produce one or more of only three possible outcomes:

— a continuation of the process of negotiations until either an agreement or a breakdown occurs;
— no agreement, leading to a breakdown in talks and renewed conflict;
— an agreement resolving some, or all, of the outstanding issues.

The likelihood in the South African context of each of these outcomes will now be briefly summarized and assessed.

Continue talking

One possible result is that the outstanding issues may prove so intractable that negotiations continue in the current on/off mode for an indefinite period without coming closer to a settlement or deteriorating again into conflict. Although this, theoretically, may happen, the relative ease with which the few preliminary meetings between the government and the ANC were set up, the apparent cordial atmosphere prevailing among participants, the absence so far of blatant antagonism, and the favourable outcome of those few meetings that resulted in consensus reports by joint technical committees on procedural
matters, point strongly against such an inconclusive result.

Already some issues have apparently been agreed to by both sides to the talks: issues relating to the continuation of the armed struggle, the return of exiles, the release of the remaining political prisoners and the conditions for amnesty. As suggested earlier, it is conceivable that other issues such as land and economic reform may prove to be more intractable. Experience with such issues in other instances of negotiations is that they are normally, with the consent of all the negotiating partners, deliberately left out of the initial "political packs", with the understanding that they will be addressed at a later stage, so as not to endanger the success of initial negotiations. This, however, presupposes commitments from all concerned to the success of the talks. If a sufficient degree of commitment to success does not exist, the talks may, in fact, break down.

Another point that militates against such an inconclusive scenario is that of time constraints. The support bases of both the ANC and the NP are too fragile and volatile to maintain the status quo indefinitely without increasing defections both to the left and the right. Neither De Klerk nor Mandela can really afford to allow this to happen through allowing stalling tactics or the development of a stalemate. Their own credibility, legitimacy, status and therefore political future in their organizations depend upon a speedy and successful conclusion to the negotiations. Otherwise the increasing opposition to both leaders (from both the right and the left) may weaken their bargaining positions and complicate the successful implementation of any eventual settlement.

In addition, De Klerk faces an election at the latest in 1995 – unless it is postponed by some earlier amendment to the constitution. If De Klerk and Mandela can conclude a "quick" settlement providing for measures that will effectively address the most pressing needs and fears of their supporters, they may again succeed in re-recruiting some of the defectors who have already left their parties. Such defectors may return because they decide that fears of their leaders selling them out may have been unjustified.

This time constraint leads to the conclusion that an indefinite period of negotiation without substantial progress is unlikely, and that, with time, the talks will either break down or a series of mutually acceptable settlements or pacts will (probably) eventually be reached. The outcome may take some time to appear.

Breakdown: Endemic conflict, deadlock, or temporary setback

In July 1990 the ANC formally abandoned, in favour of a negotiated settlement, the "armed struggle" it waged for thirty years against the NP government in an attempt to attain full political rights and political power. The current president of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, has reiterated recently that the ANC will not return to the armed struggle. Nevertheless, in some circles (of both participants and outside observers), a return to the armed struggle is still contemplated as a feasible alternative if negotiations should reach stalemate or do not work out as expected. Both the ANC and the Afrikaner Weerstands­beweging (AWB) continue training their forces for such an eventuality. The Conservative Party hints increasingly that it would consider violent resistance to attempts to obstruct whites from exercising racial self-determination.

Although the option of returning to violence in order to settle the country's political disputes cannot be totally discounted, a number of different considerations make it only a theoretical option raised purely for purposes of propaganda.

To begin with, the ANC's "armed struggle" was for all practical purposes a dead letter for at least two or three years before it was formally abandoned. The ANC faced a strong and relatively effective counter-revolutionary strategy by the South African government that minimized armed struggle successes. The changes brought about in the international political climate by the reforms in the Soviet Union caused a reduction in moral and material support by the Soviet government, the ANC's biggest sponsor. The international climate against the export of revolution to other countries is today at its strongest. And in the absence of outside sponsorship, the ANC does not command sufficient resources to take up the armed struggle again.

A programme to return ANC exiles to South Africa is in full swing, as we noted earlier. This will reverse the thirty year-long outflow of political exiles. Many exiled ANC leaders are already back in the country, settling in after a long absence. Poor (and deteriorating) living conditions abroad for exiles, especially in Africa, have further caused a groundswell of urgency among these exiles to return as soon as possible. They will probably rebel against either being exiled again or not being able to return home after all.

Although the negotiations seem to proceed slowly, and are currently subject to many a political hiccup, the prospects of the ANC's achieving most of their objectives through a negotiated settlement are still very good. As we pointed out above, the most important intervening variable probably lies with the time constraints involved.

An ANC decision at this stage to reverse the peace process and return to exile and violent conflict does not seem likely. It would have a vastly superior military force against it – and have to operate, probably, as we have seen, with international (and even domestic) support insufficient to maintain even the status quo ante. Too much prestige, too many vested interests and too great an investment in costs of all kinds are already tied up in the negotiations for the ANC to now risk a breakdown.

The NP finds itself in an even more difficult position regarding a return to counter-revolutionary war with the ANC. It would face a massive international backlash, which might even be stronger than today's economic and political sanctions. Many international statesmen have put their personal reputations on the line to support the De Klerk regime in its reform efforts (in many instances in the face of huge resistance in their own constituencies). De Klerk just cannot afford to alienate these international supporters by reverting to a hard-line counter-revolutionary position.

The dismantling of apartheid has also proceeded to a point at which it is in fact irreversible. The NP thus faces crucial decisions in its own ranks concerning its future identity and goals. Its only chance of medium- to long-term political survival is to continue along the road of reform it has chosen to take. A return to the crossroads is impossible.

Financially, the South African government cannot in any case afford to go back to war; here lies the most important reason why an attempt was made in the first place to make peace with the ANC. The fragile condition of
the South African economy will only be prejudiced if peace efforts break down. And this the NP simply cannot afford.

Extremists both to the left and the right continue to threaten violent action. But this is because they perceive the impossibility of attaining their respective goals: these threats are not serious. Left-wing radicals find it increasingly difficult to mobilize international support for violence. Their domestic support seems to be limited to radical intellectual youths frustrated with the slow pace of reform. They can no longer mobilize mass popular support. If the negotiation process produces constructive results, the incidence of left-wing violence will diminish.

Right-wing resistance is of an individualistic and small-scale nature. It is not well-organized for a number of reasons, one of which is important—the lack of a feasible right-wing alternative to negotiated settlement. From all indications the security forces are easily containing and curbing sporadic outbreaks of sabotage and terrorism. As a result, it is probable that right-wing supporters and sympathizers will in the end follow one of four possible courses of action:

—emigrate to another country if they do not wish to accept a new South Africa — and if they can afford to;

—fight until apprehended or killed by security action;

—accept the new situation under protest and either continue to support their leaders in opposition to the new society or return to the NP as the only party that can effectively try to protect white interests;

—fall into political apathy and concentrate on becoming as financially independent as possible—or on conducting themselves as inconspicuously as possible in order to continue with their accustomed lifestyle as part of a subsociety of whites. This is what has happened in Zimbabwe.

All these arguments point to the conclusion that both the ANC and the NP are captive audiences of the negotiations process, and that we can be very clear on the absence of feasible alternatives to a negotiated settlement. The doomsday scenario of a protracted, endemic conflict situation in South Africa thus seems unrealistic. At the worst, we may experience short-term breakdowns in talks as a result of a deliberate (or even unintentional) brinkmanship ploy pushed too far by one or other of the participants. This may cause temporary setbacks, but will probably not lead to lasting conflict unless one of the existing variables in the political equation changes dramatically, causing one or more of the participants to reassess the costs and benefits of a negotiated settlement against what it might achieve through another attempt at violent overthrow of the present regime or a return to the status quo ante.

The additional variable of time constraints (already addressed), will seriously affect the outcome of negotiations and the potential breaking down of peace. The longer a settlement is delayed, the greater is the danger that an increasing number of De Klerk's and Mandela's already reluctant supporters may defect, from sheer frustration, to more right-wing or more left-wing organizations opposing a negotiated settlement.

Agreement

A negotiated settlement can be of a distributive or an integrative nature. A distributive agreement means that in the end there are both winners and losers, and that the extent of one's gain equals the extent of the other's losses. An integrative result means that all parties can claim gains from the negotiations. This is the "win-win" outcome (not a "win-lose" one). An integrative result is obviously preferable because it gives all parties a share of the political spoils as well as improved face-saving opportunities and therefore better chances of a durable settlement in the long run. One example of each kind of settlement will be briefly summarized.

The most likely potential outcomes of the current political negotiations concerning the future distribution of power in the country are the following: either a coalition government of national reconciliation; or an ANC dominated socialist-oriented alliance in power opposed by an NP dominated capitalist-oriented opposition alliance—a situation similar to that currently to be seen in Namibia.

A government of national unity/reconciliation

Although the ANC already probably commands sufficient support to win outright an at-large election, it will be in its interest to consider bending over backwards to accommodate at least the most prominent existing moderate political parties in the establishment of a government of national unity/reconciliation. Such a government would include the ANC, NP, DP and IFP.48

In support of this argument we adduce the following:

—This would be the optimum negotiated compromise resulting in a clearly integrative result in which every member of the governing alliance would be a winner. It would minimize resistance to the new government from the ranks of opposition parties and maximize their co-operation with government policies.

—The stated policies of the four organizations already to a large extent overlap, the principal differences being the preferences of the NP, DP and Inkatha for more free-market mechanisms and a lesser role for the state than the ANC would like to see. The NP, what is more, is much closer to the ANC than one might think on the issue of state intervention in society. The existence of agricultural control boards, the big role currently played by the state in the provision of black housing, the existence of subsidized housing for public officials, health services for the poor and so forth prove the point sufficiently.

For the rest, all parties agree on the necessity of having a multiparty, democratic political system with a bill of rights protected by a constitutional court, and on the importance of minority guarantees in order to protect cultural, linguistic and religious minorities from majority domination.

—the ANC (which is a predominantly Xhosa-controlled organization) cannot in its own interest allow the alienation of perhaps the majority of the largest and third largest ethnic groups in the country; nation building would be severely affected if this were to happen.

—It would stimulate and attract economic growth because it would restore investors' confidence in the country.

—It would further bind these other ethnic groups to the policies of the ANC by establishing co-responsibility for the decisions of a government in which the ANC would
probably in any case be the major/ senior partner and driving force.

— It would pacify and reassure whites that they still had a stake in government (especially if politically sensitive portfolios such as Police, Defence and Agriculture were left in white hands). This would guarantee the support of the security establishment, minimize the risk of a right-wing coup, and maximize stability in post-apartheid South Africa.

— It would be the only way in which minority parties such as the NP, DP and Inkatha could still retain some measure of influence in the government of the country.

— This option would probably enjoy the support of an overwhelming number of people in the country because it would have the support of the three largest ethnic groups and of substantial numbers of people from the smaller groups too.

No other option has the all-round potential of a government of national unity to consolidate the maximum political support possible in the country.

The Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) option

Although the benefits of a government of national unity are clear, there is a question-mark behind its acceptance in certain circles, especially a query concerning the ANC's commitment to such a policy as a result of its perceived dominant position at present. If the ANC is not interested in such an option, it presents the other parties with no other choice than to consolidate support in an alliance or coalition opposing the ANC. This would probably result in the Namibian DTA-option: the ANC and a few other sympathetic political parties forming a working relationship in order to govern, with an NP/IPF alliance in opposition.

This solution would inevitably render ethnic polarization more acute and be detrimental to the goal of nation building and legitimate government. It is a good example of a distributive type of ethnically-based outcome that would generate substantial potential for societal destabilization. For this reason a DTA option should probably only be considered as a long-stop position by the prospective members of the opposition alliance, while the ANC for its part would be well advised to consider a reconciliation alliance as first option.

Conclusions

Comparative studies have proved that policy choices by political elites directly affect the political and institutional outcomes of the process of government. This is especially relevant for the development of democratic cultures, structures and processes in South Africa.

Various potential demographic, cultural, economic and political constraints on the future development of democracy in the country have been identified. Fortunately, they are not independent variables but dependent variables. It will depend very much on the leaders of the different interest groups that will eventually participate in the political negotiations process concerning a new political system for South Africa as to whether these potential constraints prove true constraints or not.

It is much too early to tell whether the current trend towards populist democratization in South Africa will become established practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that, despite the existence of strongly authoritarian political cultures in virtually all the principal political parties in the country, there are indications of emerging value and attitudinal changes leading increasingly to a generally accepted political culture of moderation and greater tolerance of political criticism. This is underscored by all the signs of a strong and developing civil society relatively independent of the ANC. These are all encouraging indications of a development in democratization; they are creating the normative preconditions for durable political pluralism.

Linked to this development another, parallel consideration is making itself ever more surely at home within South African society. This is the important perception that there is no feasible alternative to a negotiated settlement. The costs of a full-scale renewal of war are still perceived to be higher than the costs of compromise. This perception fortunately has a moderating effect on the policy positions of the country's different political interest groups. As argued earlier, it is, fortunately, conceivable for a number of reasons that this perception will soon change.

Stable democratic government in South Africa in the longer term needs radical policy changes within the parameters of a growing economy. The ANC is currently the front-runner to form either a new post-apartheid government on its own, or be the senior and most influential partner in a future coalition government. The organization's publicly declared political and economic policy positions are unfortunately still totally inappropriate to achieve the objectives of a more just redistribution of resources against the necessary background of a growing economy. These policies are already much watered-down versions of the organization's original Marxist-Leninist doctrines, and further indications exist that the ANC will moderate them even further. Strong ideological resistance against such steps can, however, be expected from ideologues in the ANC/SACP alliance.

The strong economic position of South Africa relative to that of other Third World countries means that the country can probably absorb some of the economic shocks and setbacks that lie ahead. It will, however, not be able to maintain satisfactory economic prosperity under badly-conceived macroeconomic policies.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt from other transitions to democracy is that, once the transition has started, it is not a foregone conclusion that the final outcome will be a lasting democratic system. Many things can go awry. The choice of what will happen, however, lies squarely within the discretion of the political elites involved in steering the transition in one or another direction.

One can only hope that the democratic navigation system is effective enough to steer a post-apartheid South Africa clearly and safely between the Scylla of authoritarian post-apartheid society and the Charybdis of a typical run-down Third World state.

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