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by E.S. Reddy, March 1992

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The white South African referendum of March 17th - called by State President F. W. De Klerk to counter a threat to his credibility among the whites - has turned out to be much more significant than he had anticipated because of the issues and the alignment of forces in the campaign and the resounding "yes" vote which hardly any analysts had anticipated.

It has, as De Klerk said, "closed the book on apartheid." It can become, as he claimed, one of the most fundamental turning points in the history of South Africa - but only if the ruling National Party is prepared to grasp the opportunity to help bring about a new South Africa.

The white minority which dispossessed, dominated and brutally repressed the black majority for generations has now proclaimed, in the most authoritative manner, its willingness to give up its monopoly of political power. Anthony Lewis, columnist of the New York Times, compared this to the upper class in Britain agreeing in the 19th century to give up some political power for continued economic privilege. The change is even more far-reaching in South Africa where race and colour have determined class. The whites had perhaps little choice as the alternative was conflict and chaos, but that does not detract from the significance of the vote.

The process of change unfolded in 1989 when the ruling National Party decided - in the face of the upsurge of the liberation movement and international sanctions — that it had to abandon white supremacy and seek a negotiated settlement. De Klerk, the new State President, unbanned the African National Congress (ANC) and other organisations in February 1990, released their leaders and held talks with the ANC and other groups.

Much change has taken place since then. Many laws, regarded as the "pillars of apartheid", have been abrogated and free political activity allowed. But power remained where it had been, the constitution was based on racial separation and domination, and little could be done to eliminate the economic and social effects of apartheid.

The process of change toward a democratic society required the working together of the ANC, the predominant political organisation in the country, and the ruling National Party. There could be no genuine transition to democracy without the ANC. And there could be no peaceful transition

without the cooperation of the National Party in suppressing attempts at destabilisation of the process by the armed forces and the well-armed white terrorist groups.

But the talks between the government and the ANC dragged on, with frequent crises, as the government tried to manage the transition in its own way and hoped to outmanoeuvre the ANC, with a view to ensuring a white veto in any new dispensation. The release of political prisoners and the return of the exiles were delayed for a long time, so that negotiations on the future could not take place and the situation in the country became more complicated.

South Africa has been going through a serious economic crisis, largely as a result of international sanctions. It has been estimated that \$36 billion of foreign capital left the country since 1970. Over 40 percent of the population, especially the blacks, have been unemployed, and that has led to a crime wave.

Violent conflicts spread in the African communities, with the connivance and the instigation of elements within the army and the police, and two thousand lives were lost in 1991. White terrorists committed many acts of murder. Fears among the whites, as well as the blacks, threatened the prospects of a negotiated settlement.

The ANC became increasingly distrustful of De Klerk and his government. It prepared for mass action as the only way out.

The government was obliged to recognise that it could not undermine the popular support of the ANC nor secure an end to international sanctions without the cooperation of the ANC. That recognition led to the National Peace Accord in September 1991 and the convening of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) in December.

There has been substantial progress since then, within the framework of CODESA, with the participation of 19 political organisations, in negotiations on the process of transition towards a democratic state, with concessions both by the government and by the ANC.

The government committed itself to universal franchise. It dropped its plans for the entrenchment of "group rights" though it hopes to achieve some of its aims with a constitution protecting vested interests and incorporating various "checks and balances." It agreed, in principle, to the demand of the

ANC for an interim or transitional government and abandoned its total rejection of an elected Constituent Assembly.

The ANC, for its part, has agreed in principle to the establishment of strong regional and local administrations, and to the protection of religious, linguistic and cultural rights. It has also agreed to an interim government which would include all parties in CODESA, for a brief period until a Constituent Assembly is elected and frames a new constitution.

Meanwhile, the National Party lost three by-elections and its position was challenged by the Conservative Party which opposed a democratic State and boycotted CODESA. When the National Party was defeated in the Potchesfstroom by-election on February 19th, after calling it a test vote, its credibility was placed in doubt.

De Klerk had always insisted that, for legitimacy, any constitutional changes - including the establishment of an interim government or a Constituent Assembly - had to be approved by the present Parliament, though unrepresentative of the country as a whole, and endorsed by the white voters in a referendum. If his position was undermined in his own white constituency, the negotiations could have become a farce. He took the gamble of an immediate referendum for a mandate to negotiate a new constitution.

Though the question before the voters was limited to his mandate, the referendum was fought on basic issues on the future of the country, as the Government and the National Party had committed themselves in CODESA to "a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist state," universal adult suffrage on a common voters' roll, equal opportunities for all South Africans, etc.

The ANC was at first opposed to another whites only vote on the nation's destiny, but soon recognised that a "no" vote would be fatal to the negotiating process and actively campaigned for a "yes" vote.

The National Party warned the voters that a "no" vote would mean tough international sanctions, and the major Western Powers gave credence to that warning by their statements in support of negotiations. It also warned of the danger of civil war. It had been denouncing the ANC for only suspending, but not abandoning, armed struggle until a non—racial interim government was in power, but now found the ANC position convenient in persuading the whites to support negotiations.

All those who were concerned about sanctions rallied to De Klerk. The business community collected large funds to promote a "yes" vote. Sports enthusiasts too were active and fruit farmers, normally conservative, voted "yes" for fear of sanctions.

The Conservative Party played on racial prejudices, and tried to scare voters with the bogy of "black communist rule", but had no viable alternative. Its slogan of white self-determination and its suggestion of a commonwealth of nations, including a white nation, were hardly realistic or appealing. And the support to it by the Nazi and terrorist groups alienated some voters.

Yet most predictions were for a small majority for De Klerk, largely from the English-speaking voters. That would have been disastrous, as the Conservatives could then have painted him as a traitor who divided the Afrikaner nation.

Fortunately, there was a record vote of 85 percent and a 68.7 percent "yes" vote — with a majority in all but one of the 15 electoral regions of the country. A majority of Afrikaners voted "yes".

The whites who have been poisoned by decades of racist propaganda, including the "Ham theology" on white supremacy, have thus made a difficult but momentous choice on their future and the future of the country.

De Klerk had indicated in announcing the referendum that a "yes" vote would authorise him to make "binding commitments" in the negotiations. In other words, a negotiated constitution does not have to go through another white referendum but will be approved by all the people. This removes a very serious hurdle before the coming into force of a non—racial democratic constitution.

De Klerk now has a clear mandate and will be under pressure to fulfil his promise of a democratic South Africa. He can no longer plead conservative white opinion as an excuse for procrastination. Elections under a new democratic constitution before 1994 — when elections are required under the present racist constitution — has become an imperative.

There will be difficult negotiations in CODESA and problems in implementation of its decisions. The National Party and the ANC differ on many aspects of the constitution. But agreement is possible if the National Party will abandon its concept of "power sharing" rather than democratic

rule, reconsider its proposals to hamstring the central government and agree to the convening of an elected constituent assembly in the near future.

CODESA is a worthwhile negotiating forum on principles which require consensus. But many of the parties in it — especially the discredited collaborators with apartheid - have little popular strength; they wish to drag on the transitional period and avoid elections. They cannot be allowed to determine the constitution.

The country faces immense challenges apart from the drafting of a constitution. It has to deal with a very serious economic and social situation. And the elimination of the effects of decades of apartheid and racist domination — in terms of the deprivation of the black people and the enormous gulf in the standards of living - will need a long and hard effort. And that will require unity and common purpose in a country which is a microcosm of the world with people of many racial origins, religions, languages and traditions.

The ANC will need to rise to the occasion and build the broadest unity. It will need to secure the cooperation of groups among the blacks which have denounced CODESA - such as AZAPO and PAC. It must redouble efforts to reach the white conservatives. Many of them are not beyond persuasion as they cannot hope for a secure future without the goodwill of the Africans.

The National Party too can have a significant role in the future if it heeds the suggestion of Nelson Mandela that it cease to be a "tribal" party of Afrikaners or of whites, and become a truly national party. It has already gained some support among other racial groups and can become the second largest party.

India can rightly derive satisfaction from the latest developments in South Africa. It has played a historic role in the protracted, though yet unfinished, struggle to transform South Africa from a bastion of racist barbarism to a democratic State. People of Indian descent have made a contribution far beyond their numbers to the liberation movement and continue play a significant role at present.

This is a time when India can and should make an active and dynamic contribution to facilitate the transition. It can, with its own experience of nation-building and constitution-making in a sub-continent, provide valuable assistance to the parties in South Africa.

I hope that the government and other bodies will consider urgent measures to develop extensive contacts with the leaders, organisations and institutions in South Africa, including those in the white community.

India can develop fruitful relations with a democratic South Africa in many fields. But it must begin to prepare for that now.