

We were getting there – what's gone wrong?

It all looked so promising a few months ago. What's gone wrong? Here are a few unpalatable reasons for the present situation which has caused so much anxiety and concern.

Firstly, many naively believed in almost inevitable progress towards normality, as if the negotiation process would move steadily out of the valley of discord and distrust to new vistas of understanding and acceptance. All of us, in our optimism, hopelessly underestimated the smouldering anger which is the consequence of long years of repression, racism and abject poverty.

The failure of Codesa II to deliver is a painful reminder of the legacy of apartheid and the need to build trust in the midst of conflict. In the long term, the breakdown should destroy the cosy club atmosphere of an unelected body and bring a new sense of harsh reality.

Secondly, the negotiation process has largely been confined to a group of elites. This may be inevitable, but a dangerous consequence is the ever-widening gap between the grassroots and those at the top. At the very least, there must be a radical improvement in the communication between top-level negotiators and those they purport to represent. The secrecy surrounding Codesa committees and the inevitable leaks and rumours have not helped either.

Thirdly, the deliberations of Codesa have had no effect whatsoever in lessening the mindless violence with its bitter harvest of death, injuries and destruction of property. It is the unabated violence which is the greatest problem facing all of us, and which threatens not only to derail the negotiations but to tear asunder the very fabric of society.

Bloody-minded

Fourthly, the two major partners in the negotiations, the National Party and the ANC, must accept much of the credit and the blame for both progress and breakdown. The NP in particular has in recent weeks demonstrated a bloody-mindedness reminiscent of the dark days of apartheid. As the can of worms spills its inelegant mess of state corruption and involvement in the deaths of activists, the response has been not remorse but defiance.

The apparent indifference of Mr De Klerk is particularly worrying and in sharp contrast to his courageous actions in 1990 and 1991. Can the originators of apartheid be trusted? Is the government willing to accept the consequences of its brave statements on democracy and surrender its monopoly of power? These and other disturbing questions are being asked inside and outside of Codesa.

On the other hand, the ANC, coming out of a long period of enforced exile, imprisonment, bannings and harassment, has found it difficult to adjust to the demands of a political party moving towards elections. It is no secret that coming so close to the corridors of power, the ANC has often taken its eye off the negotiating ball and looked rather at the goalposts. This is understandable, but it also creates enormous problems. Compromises are made, only to find that they are not leading to the desired result. Pressurised by a demanding constituency, most of whose lives have been totally untouched by the negotiation process, the

ANC is forced into a position of talking tough and using the threat of mass action as an alternative to negotiations.

Temptation

The ANC should resist the temptation to encourage stay-aways, work stoppages and mass demonstrations, particularly in a time of economic downturn. Further, whilst the ANC has every justification in posing serious questions to Inkatha and the security forces, it would strengthen its own position if its leaders quite candidly stated "yes, we are no angels, there are many in our ranks who have succumbed to the use of intimidation and violence. We are opposed to this and will fight it at every level".

Finally, there are many other factors at work: the controversial role of Inkatha, the exclusion of the PAC and the Conservative Party from the negotiating process and, more significantly, the sinister activities of rightwing forces.

What can we do in the short term to make the best of an extremely difficult period of transition? This is not the time to wring our hands and bemoan our fate. We are in a trough, let's accept that the going will be hard and that the resolution of conflict and reconciliation is going to take much longer than originally imagined, and that, like all transitions, it will be messy. This is a time for courage, patience and action.

Action

Secondly, there must be a clearing out of the stables! Mr De Klerk must make a much bolder response to government corruption and allegations of state and security force involvement in death squads and violence. It is now no longer a question of laying the blame at the door of minor officials or even heads of departments. If there are ministers and senior people in government who have been involved or are involved, then appropriate action must be taken. Heads must roll. This will restore a sense of trust and strengthen Mr De Klerk's negotiating position.

Thirdly, negotiations must get back on track and if this calls for innovative ideas and extraordinary meetings then so be it. We cannot allow the negotiation process to weaken by simply muddling along and sticking to prescribed times, dates and places. In particular a rapid move towards an interim government must be attempted, whatever it takes. This objective should be reached before the end of 1992.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the strongest action must be taken to reduce the violence. Here the major players have an awesome responsibility, but if, despite all the good intentions of the peace accord, the state, the ANC and other actors, violence persists, South Africa should seriously consider inviting an international mission to assist in monitoring the violence. Impartial, professional observers from the European Community and the Commonwealth, working closely with the peace secretariat, could assist in identifying causes and those responsible. No initiative should be turned away from if it can lessen the carnage in our townships.

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