

# Election results leave govt with limited options

Key figures in Zimbabwean politics attending a three-day seminar on the short and long term implications of the 1989 elections in South Africa repeatedly asked their South African guests whether the National Party government would really be prepared to start negotiation with the leaders of the majority of the people of South Africa.

But the panel of academics, journalists and politicians from South Africa invited to Harare by the Cold Comfort Farm Trust to brief local politicians and representatives of the different embassies on the issue differed sharply.

The seminar, attended by representatives of the Zimbabwean Institute for Development, the office of the Zimbabwean Minister of Internal Affairs, and the University of Zimbabwe, generated heated discussions. Representatives of the ANC and the PAC also attended the seminar, jointly organised by Idasa and Cold Comfort.

Some academics were sceptical about the De Klerk government's willingness to negotiate themselves out of power. Idasa's research consultant, Ian Liebenberg, fell in with this cautious view and argued that there were only three options that the government could follow after winning the election with less than 50 per cent of the popular white vote.

Liebenberg said that the government had a choice of either upholding white domination by means of co-optive domination or starting on the way towards a real negotiated settlement. They were, however, unlikely to do so. The government will rather experiment with a form of "pacification democracy" built upon "sham negotiations", Liebenberg said.

He said that this changing political situation will open up strategic gaps that could effectively be used to force the government into real negotiations.

In his analysis of the election, Donald Simpson, political scientist and statistician from the Potchefstroom University for Higher Christian Education, disagreed with Liebenberg's pessimistic views on negotiation, arguing that the lack of growth in support for the Conservative Party and the voters' support for "reform" could mean that negotiations were a real possibility in the near future.

"If the Natal Indian Congress and the UDF had nominated candidates on an abstention platform for the House of Delegates and House of Representatives, the whole course of South African politics could have been changed," he said. He wanted to know why the MDM/UDF had not seized this opportunity to put up candidates to sabotage the tricameral parliament.

His views were the subject of a heated discussion and MDM and ANC representatives argued strongly that one could not contradict one's strategy by entering the tricameral system, which they view as totally immoral, unrepresentative and illegitimate.

This view was not fully shared by James Selfe, a member of the Democratic Party serving in the President's Council who argued that the new NP government's shift away from a security orientated government to a more civilian style of government created a political space in which groups opposed to

**A group of South African political observers recently briefed a range of people in Zimbabwe on the implications of the September election results. They were asked whether the De Klerk government would be willing to negotiate themselves out of power — and not all of them came up with the same answer.**

the government could manoeuvre.

"This state of things could easily be upset," he warned. "An incursion into South Africa, a breakdown in the peace process in Angola, a civil war in Namibia — all these things could bring internal pressures to bear on FW de Klerk's government and move it firmly back into the Botha pattern. Above all, flexibility must be met with flexibility if the external dimension to the internal problem (and here we are talking about the ANC and MK) is to be solved."

However, Zac Yacoob, a member of the executive of the Natal Indian Congress, warned that people should not expect the MDM or any of the other extra-parliamentary groups to hold their strategies at bay to wait for people within the system to adjust the political system. The struggle and the pressure against the National Party is of great importance and morally justifiable and necessary.

After an intense discussion the majority of the delegates agreed that the MDM should continue with their struggle with their existing

resources and that this struggle should be conducted in a "disciplined and constructive" way.

Barry Streek, a Cape Town journalist, gave a somewhat more pessimistic interpretation of the outcome of the election than Donald Simpson. He said that the people of South Africa were divided into two camps — or as he called it, "two balloons drifting swiftly apart".

According to Streek the perceptions of the political reality differed sharply depending whether one was drifting in the "system" or the "struggle" balloon. The two groups' political realities are shaped by different experiences and sharply divergent value systems.

"Until those within the system balloon really accept that those within the struggle balloon do represent the majority of South Africans, I don't foresee any progress towards real democracy in our country," Streek said. "And what happened in the election campaign did not, I'm afraid, do that much in this direction. It rather confirmed and entrenched the two balloons."

"At the same time, however, the government almost desperately wants South Africa to become an active partner in the development of southern Africa. This provides the potential for flexibility and a more open approach to the current rulers of South Africa. Indeed, such an approach could even help bring the balloons down to earth," he said.

After three days of exhaustive deliberation the South African experts also spoke to representatives of embassies from the United States, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, People's Republic of China, Denmark and others.

Here once again the central question was if FW de Klerk could be trusted to negotiate with organisations that represent the majority of the people in South Africa. A question that has yet to be answered . . .

## TV news 'carefully manipulated'

The news on television was carefully manipulated in the run up to the general election on September 6 to fit into the NP election strategy, according to Prof John van Zyl of the department of dramatic art at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Prof Van Zyl, who is also a well known TV critic for *The Star*, co-ordinated a joint Idasa/Wits television news monitoring project prior to the election.

Students monitored the SABC television news throughout the election campaign and drew some interesting conclusions on the role the SABC played in building up the image of President F W de Klerk while demonising the Mass Democratic Movement.

"It is quite remarkable how the MDM was constructed as a leaderless, voiceless mob without a clear ideology and without a democratic mandate from the people," Van Zyl says. "The result was that the MDM became the embodiment of the deep, atavistic fear of many white South Africans, that of uncontrollable, black mob violence."

The SAP on the other hand was constantly valorised on television. "Hardly a broadcast passes without a reference to the police, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the police have taken the place of the military as the prime source of the state's power. The Minister of Defence appears far less than the Minister of Law and Order."

According to Van Zyl, the election debates tended to reinforce the cultivated image of the NP as the party of the reasonable centre. "The Democratic Party was marginalised in these debates in spite of good individual performances by Zach de Beer, Harry Schwarz and Denis Worrall. Their very reasonableness and logic could not counter the sensational headlines and threats by Vlok."

"Overall," Van Zyl concluded, "television news was carefully orchestrated to hold up the MDM defiance campaign as a warning of black violence to voters, as well as cultivating an image of F W de Klerk as a capable international statesman, taking over the reins from an ageing, unpredictable P W Botha."