

# Last obstacles will test dedication, skill



THE passage through Parliament of legislation enabling the establishment of the Transitional Executive Council is a major step towards free and fair elections and forming a government of national unity. Although TEC members will be nominated, it should prove to be an excellent testing ground for sharing power in the run-up to a fully elected cabinet representing the major parties in South Africa.

The often criticised politicians who have been negotiating for so long at the World Trade Centre deserve credit for reaching this crucial stage. Despite the withdrawal of the Inkatha Freedom Party and the sound and fury of the Conservative Party in the dying moments of the current Parliament, a new chapter has begun in the journey towards democracy.

The reaction of the international community, the call by Nelson Mandela for the lifting of all remaining sanctions, the positive commitment by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, all will be of enormous encouragement to embattled South Africans, and assist in moving the process further. The positive economic response can only be a shot in the arm which South Africa desperately needs as it seeks to meet the aspirations and expectations of the deprived and oppressed majority.

It is expected, however, that the understandable euphoria which has surrounded this major move will soon be overshadowed by attempts to overcome remaining obstacles. Two in particular will require all the dedication and skill of negotiators.

Firstly, there is the task of convincing the white right wing, in particular the Afrikaner Volksfront, to participate in further negotiations and to blunt the determination of extremists to halt the movement towards elections by whatever means possible.

Ironically, at the same time that the CP was showing its frustration at the sands of time running out for its separatist and racist philosophy, the ANC leadership was having important meetings with Constand Viljoen and other retired generals. It would appear that there is a greater sense of reality among these former military leaders than in the ranks of CP politicians.

The fact that these talks have taken place is cause for optimism. The Volksfront has demanded that the ANC accept in principle the right of Afrikaners to a separate "volkstaat", and seems remarkably confident that this demand will be conceded. This is inconceivable, however, and some compromise will have to be struck.

The moment of truth will come only when the Volksfront actually presents a blueprint of its proposal in terms of land area and boundaries. A compromise will be helped by serious disagreements within the ranks of the right wing which will surface more concretely when specific boundaries are delineated by the Volksfront.

The ANC is well aware that the more extreme groups within the right-wing alliance are more than capable of frustrating progress towards an election. Therefore it will do everything in its power to meet Viljoen and his colleagues halfway, short of

dividing the country into ethnic compartments. Both Mandela and Viljoen will have considerable difficulty in persuading their constituencies to accept whatever compromise is reached.

An even more difficult problem surrounding the final stages of negotiations is the attitude of Mangosuthu Buthelezi and the IFP. Despite concessions made by the ANC and by the government, Buthelezi remains obdurate and obstinate.

Asking for further concessions, from the ANC in particular, is almost asking too much, but the responsibility for attempting to bring the IFP back to the negotiating table rests largely with Mandela and his colleagues. No matter what De Klerk does, and he is limited because of pressures within his cabinet, unless there is acceptance from the ANC, any new deal will achieve very little.

The fact that the ANC seems certain to be the largest single political party in the new government of national unity enables Mandela to meet Buthelezi from a position of strength. This will allow Mandela to be magnanimous in his approach to Buthelezi while keeping in mind his need to sell whatever concession is made to an increasingly impatient constituency.

The difficulty of persuading Buthelezi to rejoin the negotiations is compounded by his apparent growing irrationality and petulance. Buthelezi almost daily appears to be digging a huge hole for himself and those who choose to follow him.

Not only is he losing support in Natal/KwaZulu itself, but the business community which for so long has supported him is becoming restless, feeling that he should return to the negotiating table to present his demands there. This so far has not brought him any nearer to a sense of reality but has made him even more desperate. His constant threats of "a civil war" have brought upon him the ire and criticism of his erstwhile ally, De Klerk, and this bodes ill for any compromise.

The stakes are extremely high. If Buthelezi refuses to take the IFP into the election, and if he is supported in this decision by IFP leaders and the rank and file, will he accept the result of the election? On the other hand, if he reluctantly decides to contest the election, and loses, will he accept the result? Either way, a refusal to accept the result will bring the threats he has made relating to a civil war ominously closer.

There is very little time left to attempt an accommodation with Buthelezi, but it has to be done if South Africa is to avoid the tragedy of neighbouring Angola.

While these final hurdles may appear insurmountable, if one considers the difficulties already resolved there is hope that negotiators, and in particular Mandela and De Klerk, can build on the successes already achieved in order to make a free and fair election possible in April next year.

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