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South Africa after Mandela

IT IS not too optimistic to believe that today we are about nine months away from elections in the old South Africa. If this was a real democracy like they have overseas the prospect of a presidential candidate in his mid-seventies would have made doctors the most important figures in the campaign trails. Here, though, the health and fitness of the contending personalities will probably take a poor second to the principles and programmes of the competing parties; it will be some time in South Africa before we reach that mature stage of political atrophy in which one needs pictures to tell the politicians apart.

All the same, it is not unreasonable to speculate about a South African politics after Nelson Mandela. Good presidents sometimes last into their eighties — but the better ones know when to retire gracefully.

The ANC President works a schedule which would tax a much younger man

but sooner or later his powers will be insufficient. South Africa has a tradition of strong authoritative executive leadership; the ANC wants to preserve that tradition and the public office Mr Mandela will accede to will be no sinecure.

It is likely, therefore, that within a short time after South Africa adopts its constitution it will confront the issue of succession.

WILL THE business of finding new leadership represent a crisis?

If the same question had been asked two or three years ago the answer would certainly have been yes. In exile, the ANC's executive was composed of a kernel of men and women whose experience dated back from before its banning and a larger group most of whom were very young men (and more occasionally women) when they left South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1990 these younger people were hardly nonentities but none of them had the moral and political authority to take over the helm. When Oliver Tambo suffered a stroke it was several months before the ANC could bring itself to admit he was seriously ill; in the interval some of his duties were assumed by Alfred Nzo, a caretaker figure virtually unknown outside the organisation.

With Nelson Mandela so obviously waiting in the wings this hardly mattered, but had he not been, things might have been different.

When the ANC was in exile journalists often speculated about rival claimants to leadership; Thabo Mbeki and Chris Hani were the most frequently named likely successors to Oliver Tambo. Both were popular among the ANC's youthful following in the training camps; Thabo Mbeki was respected in diplomatic circles and Chris Hani had near idol status among street activists in South Africa.

Hani's appointment, though, would have evoked strongly partisan emotions within the broader context of South African politics — to white South Africans, after all he represented one of the most uncompromising advocates of

urban terrorism and his Communist Party affiliations would have hardly enhanced his ability to appear as a conciliator.

Thabo Mbeki belongs to a famous family and his affable urbanity as well as his distance from the military command might have won the ANC converts in the more middle class suburbs but his strengths are not those which win over crowds.

IN ANY case, during the 1980s a much vaster movement than the ANC had assembled in South Africa, constructing itself, it is true, within the ideological tradition represented by the ANC, but with its own leadership, with its own loyalties and certainly including personalities with enough popular magnetism and public legitimacy to rival that of the exiles. Nor was the succession problem in 1989-1990 merely a question of too many able candidates. The exile ANC had at best a very restricted form of internal democracy; the elections of its office holders at its "consultative" conferences of 1969 and 1985 were tightly controlled and essentially the same people had occupied the senior positions for nearly three decades.

If dissident reports are to be believed the exile organisation was characterised by a high degree of personal factionalism, with webs of patronage around powerful individuals cross-cutting generational and philosophical distinctions.

None of this was very surprising; tight secrecy, harsh discipline, and personal loyalty were indispensable qualities in helping the ANC survive an extremely hostile environment; it did so rather better than most movements confronted with comparable circumstances and it would have probably foundered if it had been organised in a less authoritarian manner. But qualities like this would have made choosing new leaders difficult.

COMPLICATING MATTERS further were the intellectual effects of the ANC's existence in the diaspora. At the time the ANC was banned it could truly claim to be a broad church of

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African nationalism; embracing a variety of political persuasions within its simple appeal to popular perceptions of social justice. Even its attempts to develop a more pragmatic dimension with the adoption of the Freedom Charter didn't really make its attraction significantly more specific; oddly enough the Charter was much more discussed and debated in the 1980s than it was in the 1950s.

In exile, though, this "broad church" dimension of the ANC was weakened, at least as far as outward appearances were concerned. Aid from Eastern Europe and the prominence of Communists in important positions, especially the military, as well as the adoption of a revolutionary strategy helped to colour its ideological orientation.

Today, insiders from the Lusaka days suggest that nobody in the upper echelons other than those who wrote for it bothered to read Sechaba, but such disclaimers are difficult to take seriously; to judge from what we know about the educational and political training administered to rank and file, the ANC had a strong intellectual life and it was one in which, for many, the certainties of marxist-leninism had a strong resonance.

When the cadres looked elsewhere for sources of inspiration and encouragement they found them, until the mid 1980s at least, in the people's democracies specifically and international socialism more generally for these constituted the living proof that history was on their side.

Arguably, the ANC after twenty years in exile was a much more heavily ideological movement than it was in 1960, yet with the sudden prospect of needing to win new supporters at home and abroad it still needed the type of leadership who could transcend sectional politics. Oliver Tambo represented that sort of leader; the cohort personified by Thabo Mbeki or Chris Hani was not.

WITH THE resumption of its role as a legal mass movement in South Africa, the ANC required a leader who could bridge the generations of change between the present and the democratic experience which was disrupted in 1960. Nelson Mandela could do this. On the one hand he embodied the social prominence and respectability which had traditionally characterised the old elite of patrician lawyers and doctors who had presided over Congress before the onset of insurgent politics. On the other he symbolised the heroism of

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armed struggle and prison martyrdom. In manner circumspect and stately he had acquired through his bravery and silence the status of a secular icon. Old enough to command the loyalties of mature generations the myths, stories, and images around his name celebrated a young man, the man pictured in the newsphotos of the early 1960s.

Nelson Mandela's contribution to the ANC re-establishing itself as a vital and unified political organisation inside South Africa may well in retrospect be judged his most important achievement.

What about the future, though? Does the ANC need a leader like Mandela as much today as it did in 1990?

Two-and-a-half years have created an organisation which is in many respects stronger even if it faces greater challenges than it did when in exile.

Paradoxically, when the ANC was structurally weak, as it was in the 1980s, it did not have to battle for support in the way it has to contend for it today.

Internationally, in the Third World, but also in Western democracies, its moral standing was hardly ever contested and its diplomatic influence was greater than the governments of many medium sized states, including, of course, South Africa's.

Domestically, it had no effective rivals among those constituencies it sought to influence.

Neither assertion would be as true today. Yet today the ANC has an organised presence inside South Africa of an unprecedented scale and sophistication.

Of course, its existence as a structured bureaucracy shouldn't be overstated, its internal communications remain weakly articulated and many of the branches which were set up in the first phase of organisation building do not function regularly: in the last year its base structures in the Transvaal have been severely disrupted by violence.

IT WOULD be misleading to picture the ANC as a smoothly working political machine.

It possesses, though, sufficient bureau-

cratic regularity to make charismatic leadership less important than it was in 1990. Then the ANC was a social movement but now it is more recognisably a political party. While its democratic decision-making procedures fall well short of perfection, its decision making processes are complex and contested.

Not all lines of authority flow from the top. Last year's conference witnessed a successful effort by regions and branches to amend the internal ANC constitution proposed by headquarters, the executive and office bearer elections provided similar evidence of grass-roots assertiveness, and current events, alarming as they may be, demonstrate the effectiveness of the ANC's allies in influencing strategic decisions. And though it is possible to trace out lines of ideological difference within the ANC leadership these need not be inherently divisive.

As the ANC has moved closer to power, non-partisan technocrats have become increasingly prominent and the policy-designing efforts of the last couple of years seem to have produced a workable set of compromises between ideologues and pragmatists. Nelson Mandela's low-key personal style as ANC president has left plenty of room for other talented men and women to acquire popularity and respect. The ANC's leadership is collegial without being faceless.

MANDELA HAS a dignity and stature which would make him an effective post-apartheid president; his integrity, courage and compassion would all be crucial ingredients in a politics in which racial conciliation will have to be balanced by social reform. But it is a measure of his greatness that he has not allowed the cult developed during his incarceration to perpetuate itself.

South African politics at the moment does not offer many sources of comfort but it has this. It is about ideas as much as people, and existing loyalties are likely to survive the departure of even a great man. ●