

THE GENERAL ELECTION

In the October General Election the Liberal Party will contest a limited number of white seats, in spite of its opposition to the communal system of voting on which the election will be based. Its reasons for contesting? The fact that the election will give its speakers and canvassers an opportunity to put across its non-racial ideas to white voters who would not normally listen to its views. It will present them with its non-racial programme from multi-racial platforms at multi-racial meetings. It will try to shake the stereotyped picture of non-white South Africans which exist in white minds. It will try to prepare white South Africans for the changes they must one day face. It will present its own fully non-racial policies as the only alternative to apartheid which offers hope, security and stability to all South Africans.

If these are some of the reasons for the Liberal Party's contesting the election, what can be Dr. Verwoerd's reason for holding it at all? After all, his Government has two more years to go, he holds two-thirds of the seats in Parliament and he has done rather well in recent by-elections. Why to go to the trouble and expense of holding an election now?

Verwoerd's Reasons

There may be some secondary reasons - to get rid of some of his own less sycophantic followers, to eliminate the Progressive party from Parliament, to embarrass further an already punch-drunk opposition - but there can only be one main reason. Dr. Verwoerd suspects that, if he does nothing now, in two years' time internal and external opposition to his regime will be much stronger than today. He reasons that he may be able to anticipate some of his difficulties if he has a full five years in which to entrench his position even more firmly than so far. There are many signs that this is his, and his party's, reason for this election; here are some of them:

In announcing the election, Dr. Verwoerd said: ". . . it is in the interests of the Republic of S.A. that all concerned . . . should know that a stable and strong Government will again be in power for the next five years". On August 11th he said "I am not going to allow the United Party to spread doubt for another year. We cannot allow people to continue sabotaging South Africa's interests." The goal of the Nationalist Party would be to develop the policy of separate development to the point where nobody could argue that there was an alternative; and again he spoke of the need for an unbroken five-year period of political calm with a strong government in power.

What does "strong government" mean in the Nationalist conception? In the past it has meant the elimination from Parliament of the voice of those who bear the full weight of the policy of apartheid. Indian and

African Parliamentary representation and the Coloured common roll vote have gone. It has also meant the attempt to crush the extra-Parliamentary expression of opposition to apartheid of those who have no vote. Political organizations have been outlawed, individuals banned or banished without trial, states of emergency declared and thousands of apartheid's opponents of all races detained for long periods without appearing in court.

Enormous Powers

The powers under which these steps have been taken, reside in the Minister of Justice. They are enormous and he does not hesitate to use them. In March 1960 Mr. F.C. Erasmus detained some 20,000 people. Later in the year he detained a further undisclosed number in Pondoland under an Emergency which still runs. In May of this year a virtual state of emergency was created at the time of the inauguration of the Republic and the threatened stay-at-home strike. Three times Mr. Erasmus used these powers in little over a year.

But now Mr. Erasmus has been axed - reputedly because he was too soft. In his place we have Mr. B.J. Vorster, wartime internee and Nazi-sympathiser, whose strange views on human rights and the rule of law are discussed elsewhere. In the only public statement made since his appointment Mr. Vorster warned that he intended to act firmly and to seek more powers if he needed them. Well, well.

That the Nationalists are indeed in the aggressive mood which flows from growing insecurity is clear from statements made at their recent Congresses. The Minister of Defence was particularly bellicose. He announced steps to train 15,000 white youths a year and to equip them with "many thousands" of automatic weapons. He spoke sentimentally of the (white) women working in the fields while the (white) men defended the frontiers, and assured his party members "that we shall ensure that it will not just be any baboon who will venture across our frontier".

Full-Scale Campaign

Apart from the doubtful diplomatic value of this last statement, no opponent of Nationalist policy can regard these views as anything but profoundly disturbing. Thirteen years of Nationalist rule have shown how hollow are its protestations of democratic principles. The next five years may see a full-scale Government campaign, not so much to put apartheid into practice as to put all those who oppose it out of business. If the United Party, which is moving steadily closer to the Nationalists, and is committed to the maintenance of white supremacy, is now to be accused of "sabotage", how much more so Liberals and others who really oppose apartheid and who believe in a common non-racial society?

The election result is not in doubt. It is what comes after that the world must watch.

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