

THE POLITICS OF NEGOTIATION

Recent statements by government and black political leaders have renewed the negotiation debate. Cynics insist this is all positioning for the sake of an international audience. South Africa is depicted as spiralling downwards into a black hole of aimless violence with the militarised state only succeeding in saving itself by smashing the black opposition movements. These movements, in turn, are presented as unrealistic increasingly radical organisations led by utopian leaders deluded by visions of armed seizure of power.

This view ignores the complexities of changing power relations within both the state and liberation movements which centre around conflicts over how, to quote Jay Naidoo, "a climate of negotiation" can be created.

As far as the state is concerned. Stoffel v.d. Merwe's recent statements concerning the necessity for "talks about talks" with extra-parliamentary leaders confirms what highly placed senior officials located in reformist circles have been saying off the record since the May election. They maintain the state has painted itself into a catch-22 position: on the one hand government has realised that the state's crisis of legitimacy has become so serious that completely new constitutional structures have to be established to facilitate full representation for all in a "united South Africa".

On the other hand, the military strategists around P.W. Botha have taken a hard line on the extra-parliamentary opposition and activated the "Brazilian Option" that effectively eliminates all channels of negotiation with precisely those leaders and organisations who enjoy the greatest legitimacy.

The inability of the National Council to attract even moderate support and the complete failure of the special cabinet committee on black affairs (appointed as early as January 1984) to come up with workable solutions underlines the dilemma facing the state.

What is significant about recent government moves is that they represent a re-emergence of an advanced reformist position within the state that was effectively marginalised in April-May 1986. Up until then the political initiative within the state was in the hands of an influential group of advanced reformers located largely in Heunis' Department of Constitutional Development and Planning but also to some extent in Manpower, Finance, Foreign Affairs and the National Party itself.

It was this group that pioneered key policy shifts: the inclusion of Africans into the RSCs, scrapping of pass laws, dropping of mixed marriages and political interference laws, and discussion of "regional-federal" options. The heyday of the Heunis empire followed the cabinet reshuffle in early 1985 that destroyed Koornhof's old Department of Cooperation and Development and put Constitutional Development in control of virtually every

aspect of black life. Coupled to this were explorations by Foreign Affairs into the possibility of negotiations during the EPG mission.

However, in April-May 1986 the reformists lost the initiative to the militarists as a result of two key developments. Firstly, in April an open rift appeared between what PW Botha and Malan were saying and doing and what Heunis and his group were calling for. Whereas the former were referring to "city-states" and independence for bantustans and defending the detention/imprisonment of political leaders, the latter were proceeding with the inclusion of Black Local Authorities into RSCs, backpedalling on independence, undoing influx control and supporting negotiations between senior government officials and UDF leaders in Port Elizabeth, Oudtshoorn, Worcester, Cradock and Uitenhage. Certain sources explain this rift in terms of a clash in the cabinet after PW Botha refused to accept criticisms from Heunis.

Secondly, the collapse of the EPG initiative after the State Security Council decided to bomb the capitals of the Frontline states represented the final break between the reformers and militarists. Significantly, whereas now PW Botha argues that the "renunciation" of violence by the ANC is a pre-condition for talks, before EPG collapsed the government had conceded that the "suspension" of violence would be sufficient. When EPG indicated that the ANC would be prepared to accept this. PW Botha and the generals were struck with the sudden realisation that the chips were now down and they had to make a choice. The choice they made activated the Brazilian option whose objectives were clearly expressed in a speech Vlok made in May 1986: 1. "bomb the enemy in its bases"; 2. re-establish law and order – i.e. mass detentions; 3. "bring government down to the people" – i.e. RSCs; 4. redistribute resources from white areas to upgrade black areas.

What followed was the national State of Emergency and the full-scale activation of the National Security Management System at local and regional level. The security police and sections of the military promised the State Security Council that township protest, "alternative structures" and ANC support could be eliminated by applying a sufficient degree of force in a relatively short space of time. (This is what underlay Craig Williamson's remark in a June BBC interview that the South American "rugby stadium" option could work in South Africa.) This would then restore the state's "position of strength" and refute the claim that Zwelake Sisulu made at the March NECC conference that "the state had lost the initiative to the people." Only after that, they argued, could negotiations be considered. Not surprisingly, armed procrastination was attractive to Botha who was still reeling from the consequences of the Rubicon I and Rubicon II fiascos.

The point is that the strength of the militarists and hence the marginalisation of the reformers depended on the success of the repressive strategy. The survival of the legal non-violent extra-parliamentary opposition and the re-declaration of the State of Emergency were indications of the failure of the militarists' strategy. (Informed sources claim that it was precisely because he pointed this out that General Johann Coetzee was ousted.)

It is in the wake of this failure that the reformers have begun to re-assert their position. Significantly, however, there is evidence that unlike the pre-EPG period where the debate was over different constitutional "models", now the debate is between "models" per se versus negotiation "processes" – the latter understood as a much more open-ended alternative.

There is no certainty the reformers will regain the initiative within the state. The conflict between them remains intense, with each pushing for different "solutions" to the crisis. This was most evident in the different election speeches. For those in the militarist camp (Botha, Malan, de Klerk etc). the priorities of reform are first the re-establishment of law and order; second, economic recovery; third, socio-economic upgrading of black townships ("Operation Oilspot"); fourth, constitutional solutions to the problem of political rights. For the reformers (especially Viljoen and de Beer), law and order can only be re-established if the problem of political rights is resolved as the first priority.

These different solutions depend on different diagnoses of the problem: whereas the militarists assume "communist agitators" and "socio-economic" grievances underlie black unrest, the reformers accept that the real cause concerns political rights.

As far as the liberation movement is concerned, since the national State of Emergency was declared, there is a strong case to be made for the view that although its capacity to strike direct blows against the state has been severely weakened, it has nevertheless been able to strengthen and consolidate its political and organisational structures. Internally this is reflected in key developments:

- * the formation of SAYCO despite the difficulties of underground organisation:
- * the defence of COSATU despite attempts by the security forces to provoke it into a premature counter-reaction after the Cosatu House bombing:
- * the holding of several key trade union congresses that consolidated industrial union power and committed the unions to a strong political stand:
- * the ability of the UDF to hold a secret national conference to review and consolidate its position:
- * the May 5th and 6th national stayaway against the white elections – arguably the largest and most successful two-day stayaway in South Africa's history that saw the Rand and some Natal townships equalling the E. Cape's predictably full-scale support:
- * the persistence, spread and organisational consolidation of the rent boycott in all the key Transvaal and E. Cape centres:
- * massive escalation in strike levels throughout 1986 and into 1987 with the SATS strike representing a clear example of how industrial conflict has been irreversibly politicised:

* the reigning in of the militant youth squads who were becoming increasingly uncontrollable during the first months of 1986:

* the ending of the three-year schools boycott as a result of NECC initiatives.

Although organisational consolidation is evident at a national level and mass actions are still possible under Emergency conditions, many local-level grassroots structures have been smashed. This is true for the small Eastern Cape towns, and some Transvaal towns that were previously well-known strongholds of alternative structures (e.g. Alexandra, Port Alfred and Mamelodi).

Externally, the state's internal policies were linked to a rejection of world opinion that greatly strengthened the ANC's position vis-a-vis Western government. The ANC is now more entrenched as "the factor" in the various international foreign policy formulas than ever before. More importantly, this entrenchment in western foreign policy formulas has led to the clarification and refinement of the ANC's commitment to a negotiated settlement and the decline in the influence of the "armed seizure of power" position.

However, a more compelling reason for this shift in emphasis relates to the extremely fragile economic and military position of the Frontline states. There is evidence that these states are unprepared to host an ANC movement that is locked into a full-frontal battle with the economic and military might of the South African state. South African destabilisation strategies have already reduced most of Mozambique and Angola to socio-political wastelands. Zambia is on the edge of an economic precipice with parts of the countryside not much better than Mozambique, and Zimbabwe is very reluctant to sacrifice its mountainous economic surplus for the sake of the South African struggle. In this light, the internal stability and survival of the present Frontline governments may well depend on a speedy negotiated settlement of the South African problem. Obviously, this is something the ANC cannot ignore.

In short, the evidence suggests that internally the trade union and political organisations have not only survived one of the most brutal periods of repression in recent times, but have been able to consolidate political and organisational structures. Externally, the ANC has consolidated itself and clarified its position on a negotiated settlement. Obviously the strength of the internal movements will greatly strengthen the negotiating hand of the ANC. More importantly, however, what all the internal organisations and the ANC maintain is that a "climate for negotiation" can only be created if all political prisoners and detainees are released, all exiles are allowed to return to South Africa unconditionally, repressive laws are dismantled and the right to free association is guaranteed.

It remains to be seen how positions in the internal and external black movements will change in response to changes in state strategy if reformers regain the initiative. What is certain, however, is that the politics of negotiation is going to become the focus of political conflict in the future. How a "climate of negotiation" will be created will crucially affect the way the current stalemate is resolved. Whereas the black opposition movements are clearly prepared to negotiate under certain conditions, there is no reason to believe the state is willing to reciprocate at this moment in time. □