Observations on the South African Elections

by Heribert Adam

Of the 3 million white South Africans eligible to vote in the May 6, 1987 election, 67.97 percent cast ballots. At stake were 166 directly elected seats in the (white) House of Assembly of the country's tricameral parliament, plus 12 additional members nominated or indirectly elected in proportion to the parties' electoral strength. The National Party (which has held power since 1948) received 52.45 percent of the total votes cast and 133 seats (a gain of 6 seats), the Conservative Party 26.37 percent and 23 seats (a gain of 5), and the Herstigte Nasionale Party 3.14 percent (but lost its one parliamentary seat). Thus, the status quo and ultra-rightist parties took about 82 percent of the vote.

As for the parties to the "left" of the NP, the Progressive Federal Party received 14.1 percent of the vote and 20 seats (a loss of 7 seats), the New Republic Party received 1.9 percent and 1 seat (a loss of 4), and three independents received 1.3 percent and 1 seat. In sum, South Africa's National Party has been voted in by roughly five percent of the country's total population.

During the past few years, the white electorate has shifted in two contradictory ways: it moved to the left on apartheid issues but to the right on security. These shifts are not unrelated. The crumbling of certainty about traditional apartheid was a factor in bringing law and order issues to the fore. By cultivating (and also manufacturing) anxieties, the authorities lured doubting voters into their camp. By associating the PFP with the African National Congress, terrorism, and anarchy, the NP presented itself as the reliable guarantor of a basic human need.

Although no official tally is yet available, it is widely believed that, for the first time, the number of English-speaking whites voting for the National Party may have exceeded the number of Afrikaners. This new constituency of fearful English-speakers makes the party's support more volatile, more vulnerable to swings in the national mood, and more dependent on efficient media manipulation.

Another change dramatized in this election was that television has replaced the print media as the main communications weapon of the government. With the shift from concern for morality to strategies for maintaining control, television is the perfect manipulative tool. The state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has excelled in its use of this new medium. It is ironical that the leadership of the National Party resisted the introduction of television until a decade ago, because of fears that it would undermine Afrikaner morale.

The right wing is difficult to categorize in class terms since ideological issues predominate. It is also noteworthy that the Conservative Party (founded under the leadership of Dr. Andries Treurnicht following the 1982 defection of 16 members of the NP parliamentary caucus in protest against the new constitutional proposals) achieved its gains without backing from either the SABC or any newspaper. Its campaign style reflected very much the National Party of earlier times.

One can say that the CP represents substantial sections of the Afrikaner lower middle class, of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, and of the employees
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Changes in Composition of House of Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Composition</th>
<th>Total Seats</th>
<th>NP</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>PFP</th>
<th>HNP</th>
<th>NRP</th>
<th>Independents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>178*</td>
<td>133 seats (52.45% of vote)</td>
<td>23 seats (26.37% of vote)</td>
<td>20 seats (14.1% of vote)</td>
<td>0 seats</td>
<td>1 seat</td>
<td>1 seat (1.3% of vote)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Election Composition</td>
<td>178*</td>
<td>127 seats</td>
<td>18 seats</td>
<td>27 seats</td>
<td>1 seat</td>
<td>5 seats</td>
<td>0 seats</td>
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a. Of the 178-seat total, 166 members are directly elected. Four additional members (one from each province) are nominated by the State President, and 8 are indirectly elected by the popularly elected membership in proportion to the various parties' electoral showing.

of state enterprises. It absorbed what is left of the Afrikaner working class by virtually wiping out the rival HNP, and a right-wing white trade union leader (Arrie Paulus) was elected on a CP ticket. While the National Party has solidified its middle class support in both white ethnic groups, the CP's strength still lies more in rural areas and among the lower echelons of the civil service. Among the police, there is considerable sympathy for the extraparliamentary fascist Afrikaner Weerstands beweging (AWB) led by Eugene Terre'Blanche, which operates in loose alliance with the CP. The CP's strong showing is particularly significant in light of President P.W. Botha's sidetracking of reform, a preemptive move which, together with the declarations of emergencies, may have prevented an even greater electoral shift to the ultra-right.

Miscalculations on the Left

In terms of apartheid laws, the NP has moved into the realm that the Progressive Federal Party occupied in the past. The previous ideological currency of the PFP — negotiations, reform, and power sharing — has been taken over by the NP, while the CP now stands ideologically where the NP was five to 10 years ago. The PFP lost because it did not move farther to the left in response to this NP invasion but rather tried to compete with the NP on the same terrain.

The PFP-NRP alliance miscalculated the predilections of traditional NRP supporters, of whom at least 75 percent had already defected to the National Party when the alliance was formed. Some NRP supporters also still blamed the PFP for having destroyed the old United Party. Many voters on the left of the PFP deserted the party for its decision to remain in the tricameral white/Coloured/Indian parliament (established under the terms of the new constitution implemented in 1984) and for watering down its human rights principles by virtue of its pact with the more conservative NRP. This abstention lost the PFP marginal seats in university towns such as Pietermaritzburg and Grahamstown.

Meanwhile, elements of the upwardly mobile Afrikaner middle class deserted the NP to vote for former ambassador to Britain Denis Worrall and two other verligte members of the NP who left the party to run as independents in three key constituencies. These three wisely distanced themselves from overtures by the PFP, which was still tainted with an English-anti-Afrikaner-capitalist image, even for Afrikaner dissidents. In some ways, Worrall assumed the mantle of intellectual savior in the vacuum left by the resignation of Frederik van Zyl Slabbert as leader of the PFP and from parliament in February 1986. The independents did very well, winning one seat and suffering close defeats for the other two.

The liberal English-language press badly overestimated its influence as well as the appeal of the PFP-NRP alliance. By uncritically supporting the PFP and the independents to the hilt, the Cape Times, among others, lost credibility with both conservative and left-wing readerships. The crude attempts to create a bandwagon effect for the PFP and the independents backfired. The English papers generally failed to give adequate coverage of the extraparliamentary opposition as a new and separate force. Given the suspicion of things English that still exists in some traditionalist Afrikaner quarters, more nuanced press coverage of Worrall's candidacy might have helped him turn around the 39 votes by which he lost the Heldenberg seat in Cape Province to Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning Chris Heunis.

The Omnipresent ANC

A major winner in the election was the banned African National Congress, which participated like a silenced phantom. Pretoria depicted the ANC as the major threat, both to National Party rule and the nation, thereby impeding attempts to create a credible middle ground. The increased presence of the ANC in South Africa now lies in its imposed absence. The more Pretoria criminalizes the movement, the more its symbolic appeal spreads. The election results represent a setback for Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, who publicly endorsed the PFP-NRP platform.

The regime failed to take advantage of the opportunity to release Nelson Mandela (the life president of the ANC, imprisoned for over two decades) and other detainees at the very moment of triumph. Nobody could have accused P.W. Botha of weakness had he announced Mandela's unconditional release in his first post-election speech. This step would have offset the negative impression abroad of white voting behavior.
Such an action, however, was ruled out by the demonstration of the resistance movement in a campaign that further indoctrinated whites against compromises rather than preparing them for a negotiated settlement.

According to a number of surveys of whites, a majority feels that the government should negotiate with black leaders immediately and less than 10 percent of respondents are completely opposed to negotiations. However, 39 percent of those favoring negotiations have Buthelezi in mind, 10 percent say every black leader, and only 4 percent mention the ANC/Mandela. This clearly reflects the success of official indoctrination that the ANC are terrorists beyond the pale.

In the wake of the controversy over the alleged role of Chris Ball, managing director of First National (formerly Barclays) Bank, in placing an advertisement calling for the unbanning of the ANC, Pretoria has successfully cowed corporate heads into avoiding being labeled "friends of the enemy," at least for the time being. Business has largely failed to educate its own community for nonracial alternatives and negotiations outside government parameters. A conservative in-house constituency and lack of support among associates constrain even the handful of farsighted entrepreneurs. The "enemy-image" also harms profits when prejudiced customers and public institutions withhold orders or transfer their accounts.

**NP Wins and Losses**

The National Party caucus has been numerically strengthened, but weakened in its ideological cohesion. The party now lacks the previous solid endorsement of the Dutch Reformed Church, as well as the support of many of its intellectuals at the University of Stellenbosch and other key institutions. In this legitimation crisis, the NP government can be expected to rely increasingly on the security establishment and justify its rule in terms of maintaining law and order rather than moral claims or visions of an alternative. The loss of cohesion may trigger splits to both the left and right, dependent on dissatisfaction with the leadership and other issues.

The ultimate outcome of such a realignment in white politics would be two blocs: a right-wing party, comprising the CP and traditional Afrikaner nationalists in the NP, and a verligte/liberal bloc, comprising progressive Nats, independents, and the PFP. Unlike previous historical cleavages in white politics, this realignment would cut across ethnic lines. In the short run, however, patronage and power may temporarily reinforce the artificial NP unity.

**One Possible Scenario**

It is quite possible that the current three houses of parliament will neither be reelected nor have their terms extended in 1989, when new elections are due. The government, acting within the terms of the 1984 constitution, could find cause to suspend the legislative branch. Such a drastic step would be taken not because of a threat to the NP’s parliamentary power from either the ultra-right or the liberals, but because of the politicizing upheaval that another attempted election of representatives to the “illegitimate” racially segregated houses of parliament would cause, particularly the (Coloured) House of Representatives and the (Indian) House of Delegates.

The democratic veneer for a pure executive state would be provided by periodic referenda on issues carefully selected and pretested. The new element of these plebiscites would most likely be a one-person-one-vote system that included all South African citizens, including blacks. The executive, endorsed by these referenda, would also be a multiracial one, including recognized black leaders willing to be co-opted. Important portfolios might be offered to a released Mandela, Buthelezi, and other credible opposition figures; this would probably be rejected by the ANC and United Democratic Front representatives but not necessarily by other black factions. Under such a nonracial system of periodic plebiscites, the government might hope to meet the demand for universal franchise on a common voters’ roll (“broadening democracy”), regain some domestic and international legitimacy because of black inclusion and visibility on the executive (“highest level”), and still ensure “controlled and ordered change” under NP tutelage.

Resistance to a suspension of the present constitution would mainly come from the ultra-right. But since the Conservative Party has no chance of replacing the National Party at the polls, NP strategists would hope to pacify CP objections through patronage appointments in the expanded executive state. This would be marketed under the label of bringing together Afrikanerdom/whites and leaders of goodwill from other groups in an emergency coalition of all moderates.

It is possible that such an “interim government” might then seriously negotiate with the ANC. Since this government would be a nonracial executive with a broader base of conservatives from all groups, including business support, the ANC would probably not reject negotiations with such a formation. A straight seizure of power is now considered impossible by the majority of the ANC executive, including the South African Communist Party component of the leadership. Negotiations would be mainly about the terms of ANC inclusion and the restoration of a new parliamentary system rather than about the transfer of power.

Negotiations would not falter on the question of socialism and nationalization. The ANC, including the SACP, now advocates a mixed economy in which the major corporations would be taxed rather than taken over. But in four areas a substantial restructuring of existing economic relations could be expected — (1) a redistribution of underutilized land to African farmers, (2) a far-reaching industrial democracy with statutory union participation in major management decisions along the lines of the German codetermination model, (3) a rapid Africanization of the civil service, particularly the parastatals, and (4) a nationalization of banks, as in France. A reformed social-democratic welfare capitalism could reach an acceptable compromise with the ANC on all four issues.
Prospects for the Near Term
Despite a simmering civil war, the majority of whites do not yet perceive the situation in South Africa as at a crisis stage. Sanctions remain symbolic and have not really hurt so far. The 50 percent decline in the value of the currency since 1985 has benefited the export sector. The Johannesburg stock market is booming as never before, and the dollar price of gold has risen significantly. Cash-saturated local conglomerates are happy to buy out disinvesting foreign companies at bargain prices. Few politicians and privileged voters focus on the long-term costs of a delegitimated state with a siege economy; instead, they are lulled by the short-term boom of import substitution and inflation. The growing structural unemployment and soaring crime rate have not yet made life intolerable in the secluded white enclaves of affluence.

This was an election with a difference, a turning point in our history. The crude methods of President Botha’s campaign forced the white electorate to a choice — and the voters chose, unequivocally, to declare the values they hold most dear.

They voted, first and foremost, to define themselves by pigmentation, not as South Africans but as white South Africans. The definition gathered together under the kruithoring banner of the National Party not only Afrikaners ancient and modern, but also Portuguese Catholics and Johannesburg Jews, toe-foozied English from Natal and culture-bound Germans and Greeks. Voters crossed all cultural, religious, and language barriers to enter the white laager, and to shut out the rest. The only binding factor was race....

In gathering up the forces of whiteness, all but a small minority — about 16 percent PFP and NRP, and less than 2 percent independent — voted against the core Western value that places the free individual at the center of the system. Wynand Malan emerged as the Afrikaners equivalent of Helen Suzman in 1961, the lone candle-bearer for a different, gentler, vision.

Sophisticated Afrikaner yuppies, coming with their wealth to resemble their upper-class English counterparts in enclaves like Sandton and Constantia and Berea, kept alive the idea of drawing all races into a common South Africanism. [But most whites] voted, as author Merle Lipton says they always will do, for security. Pressure from abroad pushed them into defiance, and pressure from the black masses at home pushed them into psychological bunkers.... In the face of threats of revolution, the voters brushed aside all other issues. Neither taxation, nor economic stagnation, nor corruption in high places, nor civil rights, nor the incredible incompetence of Nationalist governance — symbolized by the chaos at the polls and the confusion of voters’ rolls — could stem the move to the right....

For the moment, Nationalist leaders — and many other apologists — are trying to limit the damage caused by the shift to the right that President Botha has precipitated. To mollify foreign opinion, they are emphasizing the stability of a vast Nationalist majority. It is untrue. The Nationalists were more stable in the last Parliament, even though their numbers were smaller, because they were more securely seated; now their many marginal seats are under constant threat, inherently unstable.

Responsible Nationalists are also emphasizing reform. They plan to continue, they say, to raise the curious structures which Minister of Constitutional Development Chris Heunis has devised. But Heunis, sitting uneasily on a winning margin of 39 votes, is a much reduced man; he cannot take risks when the tide is running rightward.

In any event, the principal issue in this election was the question of negotiating with the ANC. President Botha cast this issue in brutal terms, saying he would not negotiate with murderers; and the reply was as plain. If there is to be negotiation, it cannot be with the ANC. Nor, indeed, will the National Party dare negotiate with the UDF.... Chief [Mangosuthu] Buthelezi, made furious by the rebuff of the Indaba in Natal, will not find it easy to negotiate, nor will his minimum demands prove palatable to an electorate that has disdained even the Indaba Bill of Rights.

So it is back to the Bantustans, and to heavily-guarded township leaders of dubious background and even more dubious support, and to the security forces. Calm will reign so long as the security forces can hold down the lid, and the majority of the white electorate is not too fastidious about how they do it. All Athenian values have been cast aside, and if the Nationalists show any real inclination to pick them up again, the Conservatives are waiting in the wings — armed with President Botha’s slogans and issues of this election — to teach them the lesson he has taught to the PFP.

South Africa can look forward, perhaps, to a kind of calm under the eyes of the police or under the guns of the soldiers...a hard, Spartan kind of peace.

—Ken Owen, editor of Business Day (Johannesburg), from his column of May 8, 1987

In sum, the political crisis in South Africa will worsen before it gets better. Only when a shared perception of stalemate exists will both sides negotiate in good faith. As long as each side feels in the ascendancy, the violence without victory will continue.

Heribert Adam, on sabbatical from his position as Professor of Sociology at Simon Fraser University (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), has served for the past year as Director of the Center for Intergroup Studies at the University of Cape Town. His most recent book (coauthored with his wife, Kogila Moodley) is South Africa Without Apartheid (University of California Press, 1986). Dr. Adam’s long list of other publications includes “Eight New Realities in Southern Africa” (coauthored with Stanley Uys), in CSIS Africa Notes no. 39, February 28, 1985.

The Laager Revisited

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