South Africa: What Kind of Change?

by William J. Foltz

Discussion of the prospects for “meaningful” or “significant” change in South Africa has engaged Marxist, liberal, and conservative scholars for years. Like other participants in this perennial debate, I have tripped over my own predictions often enough to have bruised my hubris. I am afraid that I must disappoint anyone who wants a firm schedule and route map as to where South Africa goes from here. This does not imply that important changes are not taking place in South Africa. Indeed, some of the changes that have occurred or become apparent in the last seven years have been momentous, and at the least they allow us to exclude some possibilities for the future. There are, however, simply too many uncontrolled variables in the South African equation to permit anyone whose vision is not armed with perfect faith to predict the future with any degree of confidence.

The past year has been a momentous one in South Africa, marked in particular by the open split within the political ranks of Afrikanerdom and the formal announcement of plans to give Coloureds and Indians some representation in government. In political terms, the government has progressed almost to the stage it had reached prior to 1948. But this shift is based on a cumulation of social and economic trends that make South African society today very different from what it was in 1948 when the National Party first came to power.

The demographic changes are perhaps most important. Since 1948 the white population has declined from almost one-quarter of the total to about 15 percent, and it likely will account for no more than 12 percent by the end of the century. The white population has also undergone major qualitative changes which have most greatly affected its Afrikaans-speaking portion. The modal Afrikaner is no longer a bible-toting, ill-educated boer; he is a middle-class civil servant living in a suburban split-level home, whose most immediate worries concern balancing installment payments on his color television, his new car, and the electronic burglar alarm system he has just installed. Thanks in large part to the electoral success of 1948, his ethnic community has now produced a substantial entrepreneurial and managerial class which has challenged the English-speaking community for control over the economy and which is now busy integrating itself with that community. In 1948 the income ratio between Afrikaners and English was 1:2, it is now about 1:1.3, and in urban areas it is nearly 1:1.

The African population has also changed substantially. Despite the fictions of grand apartheid, more than half the African population lives in “white” areas, and by the end of the century 60 percent of the total African population is expected to be urban. While African education and income have been scandalously repressed, both are increasing at a greater rate than is true for the white community. South African planning is now based on the assumption that by the end of the 1980s the majority of those completing secondary school will be Africans.

These demographic changes reflect and influence the evolution of the South African economy. The economy has moved through classic stages from one based predominantly on farming, to mining, to labor-intensive manufacturing, to one which is now increasingly capital-intensive. The leading sectors of the South African economy, including the most recently developed mining operations, are capital-intensive and thus require a skilled labor force. The demographic changes dictate that this labor force be increasingly black, and that much of black labor be permanently and stably settled, educated, and organized. This does not require, it must be noted, that all, or even the majority, of blacks be included in this advanced sector of the labor force, only that much of that sector be black. Thus the black homelands need no longer function to provide a reserve army of the unemployed to hold down wage rates in unskilled occupations; rather, they are becoming dumping grounds for unskilled surplus labor no longer needed by the dominant economy. Blacks have another key role to play...
in the emerging South African economy. They are consumers of the goods that economy produces, and the importance of that market is attested to by the vigor with which its tastes are being prospected by South African industry and market research organizations.

The last few years have seen a new relationship develop between government and private industry. Although South African big business remains to the left of government on racial issues, the old antagonism between the English/Jewish-dominated private sector and the Afrikaner-dominated public sector has been greatly attenuated. Government and industry see themselves, somewhat reluctantly, as partners in a joint task of technocratic modernization of the country. In this partnership, industry sometimes takes on quasi-governmental functions (the Urban Foundation, for example), while government has reciprocated in selling off parts of the large state-owned industrial sector to private industry.

Political change in the southern Africa region—the coming to power of black governments in the neighborhood—is another underlying trend affecting change in South Africa. The most immediate effect of this change was economic: it ended the "Outward Policy" of the early Vorster years, which looked for the rapid expansion of markets in Africa for fairly unsophisticated South African manufactures which might have allowed South Africa to continue to rely on an unskilled and miserably paid work force of migrant blacks. The political effects are no less important. The shock of Robert Mugabe's electoral victory in Zimbabwe in 1980 still reverberates through white opinion and unquestionably has raised black spirits and confidence within the Republic. In the short run, Mugabe's victory has strengthened the South African government's intransigence and undercut its willingness to compromise in Namibia and to negotiate openly with potentially cooperative black leaders such as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and Dr. Nthato Motlana. The white population has furthermore been augmented by the addition of highly conservative, but non-Afrikaner, immigrants from Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe who will be joining the electorate in significant numbers over the next few years.

The augmented sense of threat and isolation, ritualized in the slogan "Total Onslaught," has assisted (and been promoted by) the rise of the military to a key position of influence in the government. The accession of P.W. Botha to the Prime Ministership has brought General Malan's military to replace H.J. van den Bergh's Bureau of State Security as the principal adjunct to state power, if not the power behind the throne. The military's influence within the government complements the increased influence within the Prime Minister's office of comparatively young and well-educated technocrats, mostly Afrikaners, whose loyalty is to the state rather than to any particular ideological or ethnic identity, and who deal on easy and equal terms with their counterparts in the private sector.

As a result of these long-term trends and of the increased pressures on South Africa, Vorster and particularly Botha have worked to construct a modern state apparatus. Although that apparatus is riven with the same cleavages that affect the white electorate and is less responsive to government initiative than many would wish, there can be little doubt that its absolute level of power has increased. Nevertheless, given the external and internal challenges the South African system faces, the ability of the government to do much with that power is probably decreasing.

Black Politics
In at least one sense, African politics in South Africa has also returned to the status quo ante 1948: The African National Congress (ANC) has been reestablished as the leading organization providing symbolic expression of black aspirations. Recent opinion polls confirm the casual impression that the ANC has substantially increased its audience at the expense of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), Inkatha, AZAPO, and various forms of Black Consciousness. Various recent polls show that the imprisoned Nelson Mandela remains the most frequent choice of the urban African population as the leader who comes closest to representing people's aspirations. Even aside from the imprecision and transitory nature of opinions expressed to pollsters, this endorsement should be viewed with caution. Mandela has become a mythical figure during his years on Robben Island whose understandable popularity (like that of Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta in the 1950s) is aided by his inability to do anything that might put it to the test.

Nor does this popularity necessarily rub off on leaders of the exile wing of the ANC. There is little evidence that formal ANC ideology plays a major role in that organization's appeal, although its emphatic opposition to the country's division into ethnic homelands has widespread support. Rather, the ANC's popularity appears to rest principally on its role of systematically rejecting the South African system and on the symbolic importance of its sabotage and assassination campaign as tangible evidence of that rejection. The ANC's campaign of selective violence is an important recruiting and morale-boosting device. Although ANC acts of violence have steadily increased over the last three years, they have not yet reached the point where large numbers of blacks are obliged to pay a price for them in police repression. When that occurs, the ANC's popularity will be put to a new test, a test the government seems to want to avoid.

Trade unions represent the most dynamic sector of African organization within South Africa and are a direct response to the changing nature and needs of the South African economy, and to African initiative as expressed notably in the Durban strikes of 1973. As yet, the trade union movement includes some 10-12 percent of the non-agricultural African labor force, but it speaks for many more. It is not an integrated movement—far from it—and individual unions' relationship with political movements like the ANC varies from clandestine cooperation to overt...
hostility. Despite their highly decentralized and fledgling nature, the trade unions represent the only formal, legal, and above-ground demand organizations for blacks with which the state and private industry must contend. For their own thoroughly capitalist purposes, the most dynamic sectors of industry have welcomed and even fostered the growth of unions, in some cases forcing government’s hand; even the mining industry seems likely to accept black unionization. The state apparatus is badly divided on how to treat unions (and frequently enough treats them with brutal stupidity), but the economic and international costs of generalized repression would now be such that the government would be unlikely to undertake such a policy in the absence of a major crisis.

The trade union movement has concentrated on trade-union issues narrowly defined; these are extended at most (as in the Eastern Cape) to include some local issues of community organization. Neither from the trade unions nor from any other base has any clear leader or group of leaders emerged to speak confidently in the name of a broad cross-section of black opinion. Gatsha Buthelezi may come closest to this, but it is increasingly apparent that his support rests on and is limited by his control over kwaZulu. The government has gone out of its way to undercut his attempts to appeal to a wider constituency and may yet succeed in destroying his base in his home territory. Other leaders attain prominence as spokesmen for particular grievances (the Committee of Ten, for example), but they are captives of these grievances and lack the political resources to shape and mobilize opinion and to create loyal followings. In short, they cannot really lead, nor are they able to form more than transitory, tactical alliances with other “leaders.”

This leadership vacuum does not completely redound to the benefit of a government seeking some form of stable accommodation with blacks. The South African government has clearly lost whatever ideological or psychological hegemony it may once have had over blacks. At best it can coerce a sullen compliance. To get more, it will have to risk allowing real leaders to emerge and to deploy real political resources. This is a step which the government is still far from willing to contemplate seriously.

Formal government policy toward Africans has undergone very little change in its broadest outlines. P.W. Botha appears to be still bent on implementing grand apartheid under the guise of the Constellation of Southern African States (hence the pressures on Swaziland and Lesotho and the preference for an internal settlement in Namibia), with a more limited Confederation of (white) South Africa and the homelands as a fallback. Domestically, the government hopes to create a reasonably stable, basically urban African work force led by a collaborating middle class (hence the “Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons” bill). But government action and resources, both for coercion and inducement, are incommensurate with the aims. Hence the overall paralysis of political initiative toward Africans that has afflicted South African governments since the Soweto uprisings in 1976.

White Politics
In 1982 the South African government faced two major substantive decisions—internal constitutional reordering with a limited political role for Coloureds and Indians, and acquiescence in a Namibia settlement—and faced them in dispersed array. The May 1981 elections resulted in a comparatively poor showing for the ruling National Party, which suffered significant disaffection from Afrikaner voters to the right, especially in the Transvaal, and some loss to the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) on the left. Overall electoral participation continued its decline from 80 percent 15 years ago to 65 percent. The formal split came in February 1982 over the symbolic issue of “healthy power-sharing” with Coloureds and Indians, in effect the implementation of decisions taken by the National Party back in 1977. Although P.W. Botha retained leadership of the party and freed himself from having to face the verkrampte carping of Andries Treurnicht in the parliamentary caucus, he won out only thanks to the support of the conservative Transvaal “centrists” led by F.W. de Klerk—not a group likely to approve bold new reforms.

The name of the new right-wing opposition party tells us much about the new face of white South African politics. It is the “Conservative Party,” a name which contains no ethnic overtones. It appeals to conservative English-speaking voters (especially in Natal), to the new immigrants, and above all to the lower and middle-level Afrikaner civil servants in their suburban split-levels. It projects an image of stolid respectability and leaves to the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) the vulgar appeal to the Afrikaner and Portuguese working class. This division of clientele, as much as leadership rivalry, has kept the right-wing opposition from merging, or even developing an electoral non-aggression pact. The political divisions have seriously affected Afrikanerdom and have repercussions through most of the parallel cultural, religious, and professional organizations, including the press and the Afrikaner Broederbond. With the National Party itself divided into several ideological (or at least programmatic) factions, and with Afrikaner intellectuals now leading the PFP, ethnic unity appears to be a thing of the past.

The National Party’s poor showing in the August 1982 by-election appears to have convinced Botha that he could take on only one contentious decision. Unfortunately, he chose to proceed with domestic “power-sharing” and to put Namibia on the shelf. I say unfortunately, because there is very much less here than meets Dr. Treurnicht’s eye. It is not at all clear that the Coloureds, at least, will support the proposal or for very long back up any leader who does. It does seem very clear, however, that fairly little real power will be shared under the new “dispensation” and that the framework is not one that can practically be extended some day to include Africans. More important than the power-sharing provision is the power-concentrating effect of the proposal, which would create an executive largely independent of parliament and capable of ruling through an increasingly centralized state apparatus. It is this latter
aspect of the proposal which has aroused greatest concern within the professional ranks of the National Party, and it is not yet clear that Botha and his technocratic senior civil servants, supported in this by much of the business community, will end up having their way.

The factionalism in the Afrikaner community returns Afrikaner politics to its normal state prior to 1948. It is in large part a consequence, however, of the great success of 1948, which allowed Afrikaners to use the state to promote members of their community to leading positions throughout South African society, particularly in business. The Afrikaner community is now riven with the class, institutional, and intellectual divisions that are the normal lot of mankind in industrial society. Rather than coming together under pressure from their own black population and a largely hostile world, the Afrikaners are fragmenting, with each group seeking its own vision of security and immediate self-interest.

"Violent Evolution"
Where does all this leave the prospects of change? First, we can say with some confidence that South Africa is not on the verge of imminent revolution. The government's repressive apparatus is too effective: the military has too much sway over neighboring states; the divisions within the white population do not yet seriously undermine the consensus on the necessity for white political domination; and above all the black population lacks access to the resources that might permit effective leadership to arise. Black grievances are such that the country may be in a “pre-revolutionary situation,” but it has been there for a long while.

Increasingly, South Africa is becoming what many Marxist writers have wrongly claimed it has been all along - a system of rule by big business in alliance with the military and state sector technocrats. This development has produced new cleavages in the white population and will increasingly shift the ideological basis for repressive rule from crass racism to a rationale based on technocratic efficiency. This will permit many of the daily humiliations of petty apartheid to fall by the wayside but will not seriously undermine the willingness of whites to defend their privileges.

Although class divisions within white society are becoming increasingly important politically, South Africa is far from providing conditions for a classic class struggle. Race is much too powerful a crosscutting cleavage in South Africa, not because it evokes primordial prejudices, but because for whites, and many Coloureds and Indians, it is linked to real material interests.

If blacks lack the resources to force revolutionary change, the white government lacks the power, the vision, and the will to do what would be necessary to bring about peaceful progress. Minimum requirements for such progress would include drastic modifications in the homeland system, including very large economic transfers to build up the black rural economy, and above all allowing a black middle class to develop independent political resources. Even though a few persons in government circles see the problem in those terms, they are politically hamstrung by the workings of South Africa's peculiar white democratic system and by deep divisions within the state apparatus. If the South African political system has not yet enthusiastically co-opted a Buthelezi, a Motlana, a Percy Qoboza, it has little hope of co-opting black leaders of the future, whatever constitutional rearrangements it may produce.

The policies of the great powers will play a role in South Africa's future, but they seem likely to play that role largely by default. In the absence of dramatic regional events, the United States and the other Western nations will continue to deal with South Africa at arm's length, but deal with it nonetheless. The emergence of any internal, strong black leadership would evoke a positive response in Washington, but in the absence of such leadership U.S. policy innovations will mostly continue to come as a reaction to violent episodes within South Africa. The Soviet Union's principal role for the moment seems to be that of useful support for the South African regime's "total onslaught" ideology. (Just as South Africa provides helpful support for Moscow's policy in the rest of Africa.) Although the Soviet Union will certainly continue to aid the ANC's political and military efforts, it shows no sign of willingness to risk any direct involvement in the struggle or to use its own production of gold and other minerals to bring pressure on the South African economy. In the absence of more positive external involvement, the most important sources of change will be internal to South Africa.

Change in South Africa will most likely continue to occur in a discontinuous, sometimes violent, manner, which will satisfy few. Initially at least, interactions between trade unions, industry, and the government will be keys to the pattern of change. They are most likely to proceed (and in the process to increase the status and material welfare of many blacks) according to what former U.S. Ambassador to South Africa William Edmondson has aptly called "violent evolution." Over the next several years South Africa will change further, as the effects of underlying social, economic, and regional trends continue to work themselves out. These in turn will force a divided white population and the government into new attempts at political accommodation with the black majority. Nothing in the present situation suggests that those attempts will succeed until black leaders acquire the resources for independent political organization and action. When they do, the pattern of accommodation that emerges will likely bear little relation to anyone's current projections.

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