



**SWEARING IN: FW de Klerk and PW Botha take the oath.**



**SHAKE ON IT: Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi with Winnie Mandela and Joe Modise.**

*Pictures: THE ARGUS*

# End of a political honeymoon

**Despite growing tensions in the government of national unity, there is no need for gloomy predictions as the ship of state is not in any serious trouble, says KAIZER NYATSUMBA.**

**S**OME people have worked themselves into quite a panic in recent weeks over the perceived state of affairs in the government of national unity (GNU). All kinds of apocalyptic predictions have been made. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the GNU may be on the verge of collapse; others have deliberately sought to paper over the apparent cracks, claiming without much success that all is well

in the coalition.

The truth lies somewhere in between these two poles. The honeymoon, which had begun to lull some into the false belief that our country had become a fairyland in which everybody would live happily ever after, is finally over. It ended even before the expiry of the 100 days President Nelson Mandela spoke about when he opened parliament in May – and not a moment too soon.

Instead of worrying about tensions in the GNU or the increasingly strident tone of parliamentary debates, we should welcome this new development. Not only is this to be expected, but it is also healthy for the country.

Let us retrace our steps to July when difficulty within the GNU first became public knowledge. Some, including people within the National Party (NP), had expressed

concern that NP leader and Deputy President FW de Klerk had been very quiet during the first two months of the GNU.

As one journalist put it, De Klerk did not simply maintain a low profile, he had no profile at all. He had lost interest in politics, some "experts" opined sagaciously – and then came the bombshell: some NP members of parliament wanted De Klerk and their party to quit the GNU.

The reasons given were that they felt the NP was not being taken seriously by the ANC majority in the GNU and that the party was being embarrassed by some government decisions, notably the controversial one of allowing cabinet ministers to employ contract personnel at high salaries, and the public utterances of some ANC ministers, for example, Joe Modise on Israel and Dullah Omar on relations with Cuba.

Under pressure to increase his visibility, De Klerk returned from an overseas visit – one of several he has undertaken as deputy president – to reaffirm his interest in politics. He said he had deliberately stayed out of the limelight to allow the ANC to come to grips with its new responsibilities and to avoid being seen as upstaging Mandela.

He also observed that the South African media were not used to coalition governments and expected a continuation of the traditional politics of the past, in which opposition parties routinely criticised the government simply for the sake of criticising.

Sadly, he was right. It would indeed appear that some have grown used to the ding-dong politics of the past characterised by conflict and disagreement and producing countless newspaper headlines. As long as there was no open dissent in the GNU, politics was boring – and so De Klerk had to be goaded into rocking the boat.

De Klerk's reasons for lying low after Mandela's inauguration are entirely plausible. Although he would have failed to upstage the president had he tried to do so, he would have been accused of failing to come to terms with the fact that he was no longer running the country. The man is now one of two deputy presidents, neither of whom have any clearly spelt out constitutional responsibility. It stands to reason, therefore, that he no longer commands the kind of public interest that he once did as state president or that Mandela now commands as president.

Clearly, the NP will now be much more critical of the ANC-led government than it was in the first three months of its life. We can expect the same from the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) whose leader, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, cannot ever be

accused of adopting a low profile.

The language used in parliamentary debates will be more robust from now on and that is as it should be. Vigorous debate is healthy for our democracy, especially in view of the fact that we have a weak parliamentary opposition as a result of the constitutionally enforced government coalition. Nobody should be alarmed by this trend.

There is no reason to believe that the NP will withdraw from the GNU between now and the end of 1996, by which time the country's new constitution must be finalised. The ruling party for 45 years, the NP has become so used to the taste of power that it is unlikely to relinquish its share now.

A more likely scenario is that tensions within the GNU will increase as we move closer to the 1999 election. It is reasonable to

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expect that once the country's new constitution has been finalised – and the Constitutional Assembly has until May 1996 to accomplish this – a lot of inter-party posturing will take place in the GNU as the major parties cast their eyes towards the next general election.

It is quite conceivable, as Buthelezi has often said, that the next general election may be held well before 1999. However, until the end of 1996 the GNU is safe and news of its impending demise is greatly exaggerated.

This is not to say that all is sweetness and light in the GNU, nor that there are no lessons to be learned by its three constituent parties. Growing pains are being experienced, to be sure, but nothing more at this stage.

Indications are that the NP has more learning to do than the ANC and the IFP. Although De Klerk says he does not need to be reminded that he is no longer running the country, it would seem that some within his party do. It is the actions emanating from

these quarters, which at times show a lack of understanding of how democracy functions, that are responsible for increasing tensions in the GNU.

An example is their demand that National Party MPs should chair some of the 26 parliamentary standing committees, although the interim Constitution makes no provision for the extension of the power-sharing principle to parliament and parliamentary committees.

Mandela has already made a number of important concessions to the NP, at times against the wishes of the ANC parliamentary caucus. He gave the presidency of the 90-member Senate – a third of whose members come from the ANC – to the NP, which in turn gave the position to former justice minister Kobie Coetsee. He also gave the NP the post of deputy chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly (CA) – a job filled by former manpower minister Leon Wessels.

The ANC caucus agreed to the Senate position being given to Coetsee as a quid pro quo for the NP dropping its demand for one of the security ministries – defence or safety and security. However, there was no such agreement about the deputy chairpersonship of the CA, a position that the caucus had earmarked for the ANC's Bridgit Mabandla.

This explains the strong opposition of ANC parliamentarians to the parcelling out of parliamentary committee chairs to the NP. However, reliable sources say the caucus is prepared to allow ANC members in the committees to vote for non-ANC people – mostly Democratic Party, Pan Africanist Congress and Freedom Front members – as chairpersons.

The NP needs to accept that the ANC, with 62 percent of the popular vote as opposed to the NP's 20 percent and the IFP's 10 percent, is the major player in the GNU and the party with ultimate responsibility for governing the country. The views of the NP and the IFP matter, of course, but they should not amount to vetoes.

Such differences notwithstanding, the GNU is far from being under threat. There will certainly be further differences in future but there is no reason to believe that the coalition government will dissolve before the end of 1996. The leaders of the three major parties in that government are only too aware of the negative message a premature dissolution of the GNU would send, both here and abroad, and they can be expected to do everything possible to avoid it. ■

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