

Yet another bitter winter ahead?

By PAUL GRAHAM

THE South African year seems to run from spring to bitter winter. By spring, there is the scurry to get negotiations back on track. By Christmas, there must be a symbol of progress as a confidence booster. Then we go and have a well earned holiday.

We return to find the tough questions (we thought we had answered) still hovering in February, and we get multi-party business under way in conjunction with parliament. By Easter the grind is on and negotiators are feeling the pinch. By winter we are back in the trenches as the violence overtakes us. Then it's spring again.

After a number of years of this pattern, it is not surprising that ordinary people have the jitters every time a party disagrees with the consensus on the way forward.

What is the growing consensus – otherwise known as the infamous 'deal' between the government and the ANC? There is very little in this 'deal' that has not appeared before. So bilateral meetings (or meetings between two parties only, except meetings between the government and COSAG), have been – not only in the case of the ANC and government – about how to get public multilateral consensus on the road map.

The road map pictures a country which levels the political playing field and makes the state and government an impartial administrator through the Transitional Executive Council; prepares for elections to find a representative body which can run the country and write a new constitution; and then governs the country with a Government of National Unity to caretake South Africa through the difficult first years of reconstruction and development.

Having a road map is a very good thing. However, everybody knows that maps don't tell you about the condition of the roads.

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And even having one is no guarantee that you will not get lost along the way. When the map is a do-it-yourself one, charting new and unknown territory and drawn by those who must also follow it, some sympathy needs to be extended to those putting it together. It will be surprising if they can stick to their promised schedule.

Two questions continue to plague South Africans.

In Angola, with the benefit of hindsight, it was the failure of the parties and the international community to demobilise the armies, control the weapons and build a new impartial security structure allowed the unresolved issues to escalate back into war.

We need to remind ourselves that in South Africa there is only a truce. Every time the negotiations falter there is the danger of slipping back into low level war – and not all the combatants are going to wait for permission from their leadership.

Secondly, the Concerned South Africans Group (a loose alliance of parties opposed to any secret ANC/government deal and interested in resolving questions of regionalism and federalism prior to any settlement which might diminish their ability to influence these question) and other apparently smaller parties seem to be expressing much more clearly the deep feelings of many South Africans. Fear, ignorance, and suspicion are apparent on all sides. It is all very well pushing ahead because the end is good, just and will benefit everybody. However, unless ordinary people are taken into confidence and carried along, they become a potent source of disruption. The evidence suggests that secrecy rather than openness has become the virtue. If we do not trust South Africans with the process, how do we expect them to value the product?

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Voter alert

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Electoral Act being passed for another few months, it is difficult to meet all the expectations of people clamouring for voter education now. And yet the education process must begin.

For now, it is still possible to place voting and elections in the broader context of democracy, but as technical details become clear and the election draws near, the demand for voter education will be overwhelming. Concentrating on the how and where of voting will become so important that it will be difficult, at least for a while, to look beyond the election to the principles and procedures that make democracy a sustainable means to an end.

A recent seminar in Soweto that brought together a politically literate group of church and student leaders underscored many of the difficulties facing the trainers for the first-time voters. To start with, voters are uncertain what they will be voting for: the differences between a transitional executive

council, constitution-making body, government of national unity and subsequently elected governments are far from clear. This string of complex phrases drawn from the Western democratic tradition shows the difficulty of translating such terms into African languages and accurately conveying what they mean. Research into this problem has been commissioned by the IFEE and has further emphasised the complexity of the task.

Attempts to explain the system of proportional representation, and in particular the different implications of national and regional lists, are met not only with confusion but, even more significantly, with deep suspicion. The obvious fear is that the voting system will permit the present government to manipulate the election results to its advantage. There is a similar lack of faith in the government officials who will inevitably be involved in administering the election itself. Not even the guaranteed presence of monitors is enough to allay deep-seated suspicions that officials will mislead voters on election day. The need to promote thorough understanding of the mechanics of voting is therefore very clear.

The numerous examples of possible intimidation at every level have immediate bearing on the voter education campaign. How will non-aligned organisations be able to conduct training seminars in areas where free political activity itself is not allowed? The anger and anxiety provoked by such questions often expresses itself in an unwillingness to accept opposition at all. On another level, how will millions of disempowered South African women grow to understand the vote as a means of liberating themselves? The intimidation inherent in domestic subservience and illiteracy is a problem that falls way beyond the scope of voter education in its present form.

Anxiety is potentially disempowering, and the list of election anxieties grows and grows. But these difficulties present us with a growing list of challenges too: a list that confirms the urgency of voter education now, and the importance of education for democracy after the first election and for decades beyond.

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