

# Compromise now but struggle will (and must) continue

**I**N THE space at my disposal, I can do no more than sketch the vectors of development that determine the shape of things as they are in our country today and as they will be tomorrow. There are a few significant facts which, if stated clearly, help to make sense of a picture that often seems puzzling, demoralising and even threatening.

First, the historic compromise between white and black nationalism is unavoidable because it is the main precondition for the regeneration of the capitalist system in this country. The segregationist and apartheid socio-political piston-casing in which the system was able to tick over until the mid-1970s, more or less, has simply run out of steam. Overtly racist policies have become dysfunctional to the generation of profit, by and large. Hence, "non-racial" frameworks have to be established.

The economic consequences of this reformist strategy are said to be dramatic, at least in theory: job creation, the widening of the domestic market for processed and manufactured goods, the opening up of export markets, the availability of direct foreign investments and long-term loans, and so forth. This is what business and many of the trade unions expect to happen as one of the main results of the compromise. Hence, all of them are in one degree or another pushing in the direction of a negotiated settlement. Barring unforeseeable circumstances, nothing will prevent that settlement, even though the road that leads to it will become increasingly rough and bumpy as the goal of a settlement comes closer.

Second, the "settlement" will be an elite cartel. It is an agreement between white and black middle-class and upper-class elites to govern the country along "non-racial, democratic" lines without changing the fundamentals of the economy and the society. All the apartheid laws will be repealed, thus removing skin colour as the measure of real or potential power, status and opportunity. But as money (class) becomes the main measure of "success" and power, the millions of rural and urban poor – essentially the semi-skilled and unskilled black workers and their families – will remain exactly where they are today. Indeed, because of the disastrous economic context in which the transition from "apartheid" to "democracy" is taking place,

**Puzzling, demoralising,  
threatening...Neville  
Alexander (right) reflects  
on the state of the nation**



many of these people will be much worse off than they are today. To use a now well-known metaphor, the scaffolding of the apartheid laws can now be removed because the house of racial inequality, thanks to colonialism, segregation and apartheid, stands on firm foundations. Capitalism in South Africa will continue to reproduce class inequality essentially in the form of racial inequality.

Of course, the negotiators try to counter this charge by saying in unison that they are committed to "redistribution" and "affirmative action"; some even talk about "historical

***'It is difficult to suppress the feeling that behind the farce being acted out in the foreground, the elements of an historic tragedy are being prepared'***

redress". With due respect, quite apart from the problem of the economic literacy of these ladies and gentlemen, their promises of heaven, if not exactly tomorrow, then perhaps the day-after-tomorrow, are no more than election tales full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. They remind one of recent American presidents who promise to reduce taxes before they are elected and promptly raise them the day after their electoral victory.

Third, we are moving into a period of unprecedented violence. The insubstantiality

of the fairy tales about a "peaceful" settlement, later qualified as a "relatively peaceful" transition, has been confirmed by contemporary history itself. Those of us who predicted the present explosions were often treated as madmen who traded in gloom-and-doom scenarios. Well, we have to be even more brutally frank. The electioneering attempts by both NP and ANC politicians to trivialise the right-wing threat could turn out to be the most treacherous aspect of the present transition. Remember Hitler in the Weimar Republic? People who should have known better ignored his bluster and genocidal ravings until it was too late.

It is the depth of folly to disarm our people by projecting a tough-guy image of the "democratic forces". When Viljoen, Hartzenberg, Terre'Blanche and their ilk warn about civil war, wisdom should tell us not to ignore them. They will almost certainly not be able to overthrow the present, or the next, regime in a counter-revolutionary coup d'état, but they can (and I believe they will) destabilise the negotiations process and launch post-negotiations terror campaigns that could last for many years.

Under the present circumstances, it is still worth recalling the old Roman adage: "If you want peace, prepare for war."

It is a matter of some amusement to me that liberal theorists who used to misrepresent Marxists as claiming that racial ideology had no causal significance, today trivialise or ignore completely the reality of racist beliefs and practices as a socio-political force which has a certain measure of autonomy. It is not the first time that political expediency has blinded a generation of otherwise enlightened people. It is necessary to restate that the legacy of racism in South Africa is like that of slavery in America, or that of caste in India. It is an historic phenomenon, not some episodic nothing that can be talked away by men in suits and ties around a table in Johannesburg.

Thousands of people have died since February 1990. Tens of thousands more are going to die before even the "limited democ-



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*Most people have not benefitted from the changes introduced since February 1990.*

racy" now being negotiated is attained. Whatever election takes place under these circumstances will certainly be neither free nor fair, but for most South Africans, the crucial factor will be the fact that a one-person-one-vote election is due to take place. Nobody who has any insight into the murk of the negotiations process can doubt that the "constituent assembly" that is being created in the World Trade Centre will be toothless, since all the major issues will have been decided by the group of (unelected) men and women at Kempton Park, however representative they may or may not be of their specific constituencies. Again, the real process that will take place around whatever constituent assembly comes out of the negotiations will not simply be determined by the paper agreement made at Kempton Park. As

salient consideration, the transition will be effected only by a "strong" government, one that can range from the extreme of open military rule to a situation where a group of well-known political figures rule as a kind of directorate leaning on the military apparatus.

Only the wilfully blind do not "see" that this is the only way in which the transition can be made while leaving most of the "main players" untouched, so to speak. It is the only way in which the present ruling group, and the owners of large capital in particular, can effect the changes needed to render the system

as a whole once again profitable,

without opening up space for either a social revolution by black workers and other oppressed strata on the one hand, or for a counter-revolution by "yesterday's men" and other disaffected constituencies, on the other. The implications of this proposition are serious but only too real.

Finally, the media inevitably focus on Kempton Park and on some constitutional details about important matters such as proportional representation, federalism, confederalism or regionalism, sunset clauses, etc, loom large and make some people excited and others depressed. In fact, however, these

the vectors of the new South Africa. It is there, rather than on the prompt-sheets of the World Trade Centre on which the choreography of the next 20 to 30 years is to be found.

While there is no doubt that important

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***'In the longer-term historic perspective, it is the profound social changes that are taking place that really matter'***

in France in 1789, the grievances of the people are so grave that parliamentary decorum and tidy gentlemen's agreements may not be able to prevent the tide of grassroots agitation from surging into the corridors of power.

Whatever happens, and this is the fourth

changes for the better have come about since February 1990, the overwhelming majority of our people have not been the beneficiaries of these changes. Instead, they have been victims of the partly unintended consequences of those changes. For these reasons, the struggle will continue with greater intensity, the soporific aims of the mainstream media notwithstanding.

The hope for a better future is to be found in the continuation of our struggle for social justice and equality of opportunity, not in the tactical manoeuvres of the horse-trading elites.

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