

Warning
to new SA ruler



DEMOCRACY WATCH

Beware of the vicious cycle



An age-old nursery rhyme warns against the potential of leaders to suffer great falls from power. VINCENT WILLIAMS puts the Humpty Dumpty syndrome in a South African context.

AS SOUTH Africa basks in the euphoria of hard-won democracy, international commentators warn of a "vicious cycle" whereby many countries have seen their burgeoning democracies nipped in the bud by the re-emergence of dictatorships run by the military or other powerful groups.

Commentators add that it is not uncommon for the military to hand over power to an elected civilian government only to take over power again a few years later. This process was described as a "vicious cycle

of convocation, transition, suspension and reorganisation" by a participant at a recent conference in Sintra, Portugal, where 16 countries from Africa, Asia, Latin America and eastern Europe were represented in discussions on transitions to democracy.

The conference heard that the key factor behind the cyclical swings from military to civilian rule was that neither group could maintain political legitimacy for any length of time because of their failure to effectively address social and economic problems.

Of great interest to South Africa's new rulers will be the combination of factors that

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can apparently break this vicious cycle – a balanced triangle in which the power of the country's leader, politicians and citizenry are held in careful tension.

In scrutinising how democracy is won or lost, conference participants noted that the conditions acting as the catalyst for democratisation are often the same as those leading to its collapse – social and economic disintegration, a disgruntled civil society and a government which has lost control. It is ironic that when such conditions are present in an emerging democracy the intervention of the military or other powerful interest groups is often welcomed, since they are perceived to be ushering in a new era of social, political and economic stability. At this point, it is crucial that the new government is able to sustain itself at a political level while attempting to address social and economic problems.

Throughout history there are examples of political systems that have gravitated from one end of the spectrum to the other, and back again. Monarchs have turned into tyrants, to be replaced by governments made up of the aristocracy when tyranny could no longer be tolerated. Such governments by the aristocracy have turned into oligarchies (government by a few) intent on preserving their own interests. These too have been overthrown by popular revolt, ushering in more democratic forms of government.

But rule by the people has often degenerated into anarchy, resolvable only by the emergence of a powerful individual. This person subsequently becomes their new ruler, but in struggling to meet the demands of the people becomes increasingly tyrannical until replaced by a group (the aristocracy) claiming to be more representative of the people, and so the cycle continues.

In 20th century history the players have changed somewhat and the cycle is usually limited to a roundabout between a civilian government and the military or some equally powerful interest group. But the cycle remains the same – military or civilian dictatorship followed by an elected government which is usually either overthrown by the military or effectively replaced by a powerful individual.

However, each of these players bring with them particular elements which appear to be necessary for democracy to survive.

In the case of the benevolent monarch, there exists a powerful unifying symbol which provides a basis for common allegiance. A government by the aristocracy entails a group of people who, though they obviously want personal power and esteem, also have the capacity to govern in the interests of the common people. A broader-based democracy which encourages the participation of ordinary people gives the citizen a chance to make his or her voice heard in the affairs of the nation. But none of these on its own is sufficient for the continuation of a stable (democratic) political system.

A combination of the forces of leader, politicians and the people seems to provide a solution to the problem of the vicious cycle.

At one corner of the triangle one needs a well-respected leader who can act as a national unifying symbol. Necessary in the second corner is a class of professional politicians whose task it is to both keep the power of the national leader in check and to speak on behalf of the citizenry. At the third corner are mechanisms and procedures to enable the citizenry to participate actively in the affairs of the nation.

Most Western democracies are in fact structured more or less according to the above principles. A monarch, as is the case in Britain, or a national president acts as the nominal head of state and works with a cabinet and national assembly. Within these corridors of power there is a system of checks and balances. The national head of state usually requires the approval of at least the cabinet (or whatever form this structure may take), and sometimes also the national assembly or equivalent, before any major decisions become law.

In South Africa, we have the example of the kingdom of KwaZulu which has raised the question of whether a monarchy can be accommodated in a democracy. For most people living in KwaZulu/Natal, the king represents an enormous sense of national pride, irrespective of his subjects' political allegiance. It is exactly this factor which came into play when Chief Buthelezi put forward

his demands during the run-up to the election. Failure to accommodate the king would have had catastrophic consequences for democracy in the region.

One cannot underestimate the symbolic significance of a powerful head of state, be this a monarch or president, who exercises real political power and is also indirectly accountable to the electorate. It is often this figure who provides the necessary legitimacy for political processes to continue, as was the case with the election in KwaZulu/Natal.

However, it is exactly in this area that most emerging democracies falter. Political legitimacy depends to a large extent on the will of the electorate to accept that there will be no immediate social and economic improvements. Few countries in Africa, Asia, eastern Europe and Latin America have produced charismatic leaders with the ability to foster the patience of the electorate and to engage in the politics of consensus.

At the same time, political legitimacy is not entirely dependent on the ruling party or charismatic leader, but has to be institutionalised. This may take time, and it is during this stage that the possibility of a return to a dictatorship emerges.

Perhaps we in South Africa have learnt a few lessons from the rest of the world. Several factors bode well for the legitimacy of the new government: the inclusive nature of the multi-party negotiations process and of the government of national unity; the principle of consensus during negotiations, a principle that will apply in turn to the government of national unity; the charisma and leadership style of President Nelson Mandela; and the willingness of the other political leaders to accept the due process of democracy.

Significantly, the structures of government at all levels reflect the spirit of consensus and co-operation which is required to sustain democracy. It is this spirit which has to be transferred to the electorate as a whole, and particularly to those interest groups which may feel that they have lost out, if we wish to prevent an occurrence of the "vicious cycle" in South Africa. ■

Vincent Williams is National Systems Manager for Idasa.