

Folly to trust the military

By Mathew Blatchford

SOUTH AFRICA has the largest and best-equipped army in Africa, and an awesomely armed police force which amounts to an auxiliary army. These are the same forces, with the same leaders and basic policies, that operated P W Botha's programme of repression and destabilisation. It is not clear that they can be trusted to maintain peace.

The problem is deepened by the militarisation of politics. Black political organisations generally depend on violent images for much of their propaganda. A large right-wing white

bloc depends on naive militarism for its support. The present white regime claims to be committed to peace but De Klerk's calls for order and harmony are disturbingly at odds with the unleashing of Inkatha and, allegedly, hit-squads on the Reef and in Natal.

Perhaps democracy can help to solve the militarisation of politics. At the moment little prevents political parties from using violence to pursue support – not even a common agreement that political violence is illegitimate. Nor is there an apolitical force to be used to contain such violence.

If free and fair elections are held, a party or

coalition with mass support will take power with a strong interest in peace and stability. It would be in that party's interest to marginalise violent elements, and it might be hoped that other parties would either accept stable political discourses, or adopt violence and become marginalised (as has happened in most Western states).

This offers no solution to the problem of abuse of power by the government controlling the armed forces, or by the armed forces themselves. Two factors might work towards such a solution. The armed forces must be denied the capacity to act as they did under Vorster, Botha and De Klerk, and the public must want to deny them that capacity.

The armed forces operate in secret, a secrecy protected by a huge number of interlocking statutes – including the Defence Act, Police Act, Protection of Information Act and Internal Security Act. Without this concealment the South African public might have been revolted by what the armed forces have done.

The elimination of all such statutes would make it almost impossible for the military to commit atrocities and violate the constitution without the public discovering it.

HOWEVER, it must be said that the white South African public did eventually become aware of what was going on, and when they did they tolerated it or even glorified it. Even the grotesque actions of the Askaris and the CCB aroused scant indignation among most whites. There is no reason to assume that a non-racial society would be much more critical of the activities of its armed forces.

Hence someone must work to arouse awareness of the threat posed by the armed forces. This should be an effective, hard-working, committed, flexible organisation without connections to any government, not unlike the American Civil Liberties Union but working in a more restricted field. (It is dangerous to leave such activities to political parties because they are always compromised by the need to appeal to voters immediately rather than to change voters' minds over time.)

In time of need such a body would identify military misbehaviour and try to publicise this and arouse opposition to it. Preferably the body should have some international status to protect it against governmental repression.

Such an organisation could not keep the military from doing wrong. Given strong public support the military can get away with any crimes, as the US military did in its 1986 arms deals with Iran, for instance. But at least the ending of military secrecy and the arousal of widespread distrust of the military might help to check the danger which the armed forces, by their nature, pose to peace and freedom. □

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Majority rule and rights in harmony

By Bea Roberts

MAJORITY rule and respect for fundamental rights should be in a creative harmony with each other, according to Albie Sachs, constitutional committee member of the ANC.

Addressing a business lunch group in East London in October, Sachs spoke on the topic of a Bill of Rights in a new South Africa, with specific reference to group and minority rights.

He said a country's constitution should draw the framework within which democracy operates. A Bill of Rights would be attached to the constitution and should establish the fundamental rights of citizens, as well as guarantee that majority rule would function fairly and democratically.

If such a bill enshrined freedom of speech and association, and upheld free and fair elections, it would ensure that all people would be able to debate issues, engage in politics and determine a parliamentary majority.

A Bill of Rights should not be seen as incompatible with majority rule, in fact, each should presuppose and depend on the other.

Speaking on minority rights, Sachs pointed out that international law does allow for the protection of minorities from abuse and oppression. However, he reminded his audience that there is another side to the matter — and that no individual or minority should receive disadvantaged or privileged treatment for being of a particular race, group or creed. In South Africa, privileged treatment of a minority is a problem — the white minority is rich and powerful, and giving them special protection is protecting and entrenching wealth, privilege and power.

Sachs stressed that there are two particular rights South Africans are fighting for: the right to be the same, and the right to be different — and the two are not incompatible. "Same" refers to civil, political and legal rights. These should be applied on an entirely undiscriminating basis. However, said Sachs, this does not



Albie Sachs.

mean that we lose our tastes, culture, personalities.

Equal political rights underlie each person's right to be different. There does exist one master/mistress culture to be assimilated into — people should have the right to retain their interests and associations. "No-one can tell me whom I can love, what I can eat, what language I feel comfortable in."

Minority rights should be seen in this context — if we give special political rights to one group, that is guaranteeing that cultural diversity becomes a question of contest.

Sachs called on whites to come into the new South Africa as citizens. "Don't keep apart from common society, don't hedge yourself in — if you do, you highlight special status, and you highlight privilege. Trust democracy — make democracy work." □

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