

"Power-Sharing" Apartheid-style: A Critical Analysis of the
Botha Regime's Current Political Strategy

The apartheid regime is at present clearly involved in a number of new political and diplomatic manoeuvres. Having campaigned in the May 1987 whites-only election on a distinctly rightist platform - emphasising its refusal to bow to international pressure or "surrender" to demands for a transfer of power - the regime is now once again attempting to project a "reformist" image. In the past few months, it has:

- * released Govan Mbeki from prison and hinted that a process is in train which will result eventually in the release of Nelson Mandela;

- * sent abroad diverse signals that it is willing to negotiate a "power sharing" constitution for South Africa with representatives of the black majority;

- * attempted to make secret contact with the ANC.

All of this has been seen in certain quarters in the west as a possible indication that perhaps at last, after several false starts, "serious reform" may be underway in South Africa and that indeed P.W.Botha may after all prove to be South Africa's de Gaulle.

At one level it is not difficult to immediately give the lie to these pretensions. At the same time as the regime has made such "reformist" moves, it has:

- * refused to scrap the Group Areas Act (allowing only for the creation of mixed "grey areas" alongside segregated white and black areas);

* launched one of the largest ever military invasions of southern Angola;

* stepped up support for armed banditry in Mozambique, particularly in the south of the country, and issued a series of threats of further aggression.

It is, nevertheless, important to critically examine the content, strategic objectives and tactics of the regime's current "reformist" manoeuvres, more particularly so as they seem to be being accorded a degree of credence in influential western circles.

This dossier will attempt to critically analyse the apartheid regime's current domestic political strategy. It will examine the context within which "reformist moves" are currently being made; the content and limits of the modifications to the apartheid system currently being contemplated, as well as something of the divisions within the regime, and of current perspectives on the possible retirement of and succession to P.W.Botha. The fundamental argument of the dossier is that nothing more than a somewhat modified version of "reformed apartheid" is on the agenda. This continues to have as its strategic aim the long standing goal defined in the regime's "Total Strategy" of incorporating certain strata of the nationally oppressed population into "power sharing" structures in such a way that ultimate political power rests with the present racist minority regime. The dossier argues that not even the most "reformist" elements within the regime, who are in any case in the minority, are prepared to contemplate a transfer of power.

1. THE CONTEXT OF "REFORM": THE CRISIS OF APARTHEID

The fundamental context within which all the Botha regime's "reforms" have to be seen is, of course, the profound, organic crisis of the apartheid system and state. Beginning with the strikes in Durban in 1973 and passing through the Soweto uprising of June 1976, a process was inaugurated in which the oppressed gradually assumed the initiative and forced the oppressor onto the defensive. At the same time, the defeat of Portuguese colonialism in the mid-1970s changed the balance of forces at the regional level. The apartheid regime was no longer surrounded by a ring of colonised "buffer states", but by independent states committed to achieving liberation in the sub-continent. By the mid-1970s it had become clear that the apartheid system was in deep crisis on both the domestic and regional terrains of struggle.

It is well known that the Botha regime came to power in September 1978 representing a new alignment of forces within the dominant classes - an alliance between Afrikaner monopoly capital and the top military commanders. It also received a degree of support from non-Afrikaner monopoly capital, unprecedented for a

Nationalist Party regime. The point of unity between these forces was a recognition that the crisis had deepened to the point where it was impossible to maintain racist minority rule through established classical Verwoerdian apartheid. In Botha's famous slogan, apartheid had to "adapt or die".

There is no need to go into the details of the Botha regime's "reformed apartheid" programme here. It is sufficient for present purposes merely to note that it sought to combine repression with various measures designed to restructure the apartheid system in a number of specific respects. Presented ideologically as a programme of "reform", changes were initially introduced in the economic and social spheres. These sought to relax certain restrictions on the "horizontal and vertical" mobility of the more skilled strata of the black labour force. At the same time measures were introduced to provide more openings for a "black middle class" in the hope of widening the regime's miniscule support base among certain strata of the nationally oppressed majority. The overall strategic objective was to create a more secure base for racist minority rule. Black allies were to be drawn into "power sharing" structures, but in such a way that ultimate political power remained in the hands of the present racist minority regime. The regime's "reformed apartheid" programme aimed, in short, not at initiating a process of gradually abolishing racist minority rule, but on the contrary at creating a new more secure basis for the existing power holders to maintain their monopoly of political and economic power. As the Commonwealth Eminent Person's Group wrote in its Report published in mid-1986, "...the government's approach to power sharing has been cast within the parameters of apartheid and with the backstop of a white veto" (Mission to South Africa: The Commonwealth Report, Harmondsworth, 1986, p 41).

The "reformed apartheid" programme has, not surprisingly, been totally unacceptable to the majority of the people of the country. Its unacceptability was evident from the moment it began to be implemented and was underlined in the campaign against the elections for the tri-cameral parliament organised by the United Democratic front (UDF) in 1983/4. However, the advances in the popular struggle, which took place between the time of the Vaal Triangle uprising of August 1984 and the declaration of the country-wide State of Emergency in June 1986, added an important new dimension. Not only did they confirm the continued unacceptability of "reformed apartheid", they also demonstrated its unworkability as a viable "solution" to the deepening crisis. As is well known, through a combination of mass action (including strikes, schools, rent and consumer boycotts) and armed struggle, the period August 1984 to mid-1986 saw the balance of forces further shifted in favour of the oppressed at the expense of the oppressor. The mass action of the period succeeded above all in destroying the regime's "Black Local Authority" (BLA) system - a lynchpin of its proposed constitutional reform programme. By the end of 1985, not only were the BLAs largely inoperative, but embryonic structures of popular power had begun to be created in black urban residential areas and in the rural areas of some of

the bantustans.

These developments profoundly affected the perceptions not only of the people and progressive forces but also of the major imperialist powers, upon whose tacit goodwill if not openly declared support the apartheid system depended for its survival and prosperity. By the end of 1985 at the latest, it was becoming apparent to all sides of the political spectrum in all corners of the world that apartheid was becoming unworkable and the country ungovernable. This perception led to the beginning of a shift in the stance of both domestic monopoly capital and imperialism. While many of the political leaders of the major western states - particularly Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl - remained committed to a form of "constructive engagement", more forward looking elements within the ruling classes of the major imperialist powers began to toy with the idea of some transition to "multi-racialised" apartheid, implying a transfer of power to a "black government" but on terms and conditions which would severely constrain the capacity of any new "black government" to transform the basic structures of apartheid capitalism. By the time of P.W. Botha's "Rubicon speech" of August 1985, racist minority rule itself was being widely seen on all sides of the political spectrum in all corners of the world as no longer viable. The regime had been placed in a position where it was been seen as having no credible political solution to the crisis in South Africa. It had lost the strategic initiative.

2. THE REGIME'S RESPONSE TO THE GROWING CHALLENGE

Faced with the failure of its own "reformed apartheid" programme to contain the growing popular challenge, the regime was forced to make a strategic choice between two broad alternatives. First, it could respond to the growing mass challenge and international pressure by beginning to move onto the terrain of what may be described as serious negotiation politics. This would imply struggling over the terms, conditions and timing - but accepting the inevitability of - an eventual transfer of power. The alternative was to attempt to hold onto power by launching a reign of state terror at home and a wave of military aggression in the region.

The regime's chosen path was never really in doubt. It rejected pressure, including the threat of sanctions, to move towards a negotiated transfer of power. It was not, however, able to totally ignore all domestic and international demands for "negotiation". Rather than openly rejecting such calls, it attempted to redefine the terms and scope of negotiation - to accept that negotiation should take place but try to shape and contain the process within parameters which would not imply a transfer of power.

Late 1985 and early 1986 saw the regime making a major effort to

secure the support and endorsement of the western powers for its conception of a "negotiated settlement". This was clearly the motivation behind the decision to receive and enter into discussions with the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group (EPG). Given the EPG's origins in a compromise resolution at the October 1985 Bahamas Commonwealth conference designed to avert a split over the question of sanctions, the regime evidently calculated that it might succeed in selling its version of negotiation to the Group. It accordingly went through the motions of discussing its proposals with the Group. This saga is well covered in the EPG's own report. When the Group presented its own proposals which would have implied moving beyond racist minority rule, the regime broke off discussions. In a letter to the EPG, R.F.Botha wrote, "It [the South African government] is not interested in negotiation about a transfer of power" (Ibid p 122). As the EPG itself put it:

"...while the Government claims to be ready to negotiate, it is in truth not yet prepared to negotiate fundamental change, nor to countenance the creation of genuine democratic structures, nor to face the prospect of the end of white domination and white power in the foreseeable future. Its programme of reform does not end apartheid, but seeks to give it a less inhuman face. Its quest is power-sharing, but without surrendering overall white control" (Ibid p 122/3).

It was the break with the EPG, symbolised by the South African Defence Force (SADF) raids against Gaborone, Harare and Lusaka on May 19 1986, that finally made the adoption of some sanctions measures by the major western powers inevitable. The raids were followed within a month by the declaration of a country wide State of Emergency, which has served as a cover for a reign of state terror involving detentions, bannings, restrictions and the unleashing of vigilantes against democratic organisations. The regime had clearly signalled its determination to embark along the path of intensified internal repression and regional aggression as a means of clinging onto power.

However, although the main means through which the regime has attempted to cling onto power has been repression/ aggression, it is evident that its entire strategy is not reducible to force alone. Rather the regime has sought to use repression as a means of rolling back the advances made by the mass struggle in the hope that this will create more favourable conditions for the re-launching, in a slightly modified form, of its stalled "reformed apartheid" programme. A number of recent analyses have referred to the existence of different tendencies within the regime, with somewhat different perspectives on how to proceed. In particular there has been talk of the existence of a "reformist" minority competing for influence with a "militarist" majority.

The "reformists" are said to put particular weight on attempts to draw representative groups of "urban blacks" into "negotiations". They tend to speak a language of "power-sharing", of "open agendas" and a willingness to speak to all comers without pre-

conditions. Their pronouncements are evidently intended to be all things to all men. Above all they have tried to blur the distinction between the regime's own reformed apartheid programme and the "multi-racial" power sharing proposals being advanced by certain circles of domestic monopoly capital and imperialism. The former can broadly be defined as the creation of "power sharing" structures in a system in which final direct political control rests with the existing racist minority regime. The latter would imply some transfer of power within a "power sharing" system which would constrain the capacity of a new government to transform the basic structures of apartheid capitalism. "Reformist" rhetoric of this type has particularly become associated with Stoffel van der Merwe, the Deputy Minister in the State President's Department responsible for both Information and Constitutional Development and Planning. van der Merwe, who was appointed to the second of the above posts in June 1987, is regarded as even having eclipsed his nominal chief - Constitutional Development and Planning Minister, Chris Heunis. He has been described as the regime's "frontline negotiator with voteless blacks" and is generally regarded as one of the foremost "reformists" within the regime. van der Merwe has deliberately set out to create an image of flexibility and reasonableness. He is on record in a recent interview as saying, "If we say we want to create a system in which no one group dominates any other group or groups, it also means that white domination of such a system cannot be perpetuated" (Leadership, 6,4,1987).

A closer examination of proposals emanating even from "reformist" elements within the regime indicates, however, that they remain firmly located within the problematic of reformed apartheid. They set out from an acceptance of the basic long standing objective of the Botha regime's "reform" strategy - to draw certain black allies into "power sharing" structures at local council, regional and national level in such a way that ultimate control remains in the hands of the present power holders. "Reformists" may now use the language of "power sharing", but they continue steadfastly to reject any transfer of power. In the interview quoted above, van der Merwe stressed that majority rule - or "black majority domination" as he called it - was non-negotiable; as was the maintenance of the "free enterprise" system. In a Nationalist Party pamphlet written in July 1986 he put the point even more bluntly, saying "...the National Party...**still resolutely rejects** any form of power-sharing which amounts to a **surrender of power**" (Federal Information Service of the National Party, NP Position Paper No. 1: Power Sharing (and related concepts), compiled by Dr Stoffel van der Merwe, MP, Cape Town, July 1986 [emphasis in original]).

The "militarists", who are seen as constituting a majority in the cabinet as well as controlling the State Security Council - the highest decision-making body in the current apartheid state - favour what has been described as the "Brazilian option". This is an approach which is seen to have been successfully applied by the military regime which took power in Brazil in 1964. It places

emphasis on promoting "good government" at local level; attempting to ensure that local level administrative structures function efficiently and introducing programmes which bring concrete visible material benefits to influential strata of local residents. It is a version of a paternalistic, "hearts and minds" strategy.

While the differences between the two tendencies are real enough, they occur within definite limits and aim at the same objective - creating a new support base for racist minority rule. Moreover, the two approaches are not incompatible and have to a considerable extent been complementary within an overall strategy aiming to impose new "power sharing" structures at local, regional and national level.

It is at local government level that the "Brazilian option" has been most evident. Using the cover of the Emergency, the military have entered townships, like Alexandra which has in many ways become a model, in force. They have established military-dominated mini-Joint Management Committees (JMCs), as local level structures of the "National Security Management System". Apart from providing a direct "security" back up, these mini-JMCs have also served to supervise and control over new "Black Local Authorities" which have now been set up in a number of areas. The apparent hope here, is that "hearts and minds" can be won by providing "good government" and reducing some of the grossest excesses of corruption, which are seen to have contributed significantly to the discrediting of the BLA system in the first place.

At provincial level, new Joint Executive Authorities embracing "white" provincial authorities and Bantustan administrations have been established. The first such body was set up in Natal in November and joins the Natal provincial administration and the Kwa Zulu bantustan authorities, the latter dominated by Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi. It will administer a limited range of services hitherto under the separate control of the two structures - principally roads, health services and education. The body is appointed, thus underlying the regime's rejection of the proposals for an elected "regional government" put forward by the Kwa-Natal *indaba*.

At national level, the regime's plans continue to envisage establishing a National Council. This is intended to serve as a forum to negotiate a new "power sharing" constitution and in the meantime "give blacks a say" in national questions. The latest version represents a modification of the original proposal first put forward in January 1986, in that it introduces an elective element. Under the National Council Bill published in September 1987, nine seats on the Council which would originally have been filled by "representatives" of "urban blacks" chosen by the regime will now be directly elected. However, the Council will still be a purely advisory body subordinate to the existing legislature. It will also still have a built in majority bloc of "moderates", known allies and members of the regime. Commentators

have compared the proposed Council to the indirectly elected Natives Representative Council (NRC), which existed between 1936 and 1950. The NRC was supposed to advise the government on "racial policy" but was in practice ignored and earned the nickname "toy telephone". The UDF has described the proposed National Council as another "toy telephone".

It will be apparent from the above, that the regime's current proposals, whether in their "reformist" or "militarist" form, do not envisage more than a re-launching, in a slightly modified form of the original stalled "reformed apartheid" programme. In concrete terms, its current political strategy appears principally to rest on the hope or expectation that the repression of popular organisation and struggle will encourage "moderate" potential black allies, who have hitherto remained aloof, to come forward and accept the "deal" already on offer and rejected by the masses. A minority of "reformists" within the regime are said to believe that there is a chance of bringing elements of the ANC into this, the majority of "militarists" are reportedly of the view that the war against the ANC is being won and that the movement can therefore be excluded. The release of political prisoners has, partly, to be seen in this context. The regime knows well that it needs at the very least to draw in figures like Buthelezi if its plans are to have any credibility at all. Buthelezi has shown considerable willingness to collaborate, and his Inkatha movement is participating in the Kwa-Natal Joint Executive Authority despite the fact that the regime has, in effect, vetoed the indaba proposals, which Inkatha was involved in formulating. However, Buthelezi has long indicated that he would only be prepared to serve on the National Council if Nelson Mandela is released from prison. This is not for any reasons of solidarity, but because he believes that only with Mandela released can he (Buthelezi) compete effectively against his influence. The regime also faces a demand for the release of political prisoners from the western powers among others. With the release of Govan Mbeki, the regime appears to be "testing the water". It wants to see if it can release the prisoners and then use the Emergency measures to control possible effects on the oppressed population (by banning meetings etc). If it considers that it can, it may gradually release others, and eventually even Mandela (although some commentaries suggest this may not happen very soon).

In addition to the intended impact on the domestic front, the regime's strategists evidently hope that such an approach will benefit them internationally. The short term aim appears to be to use the language of negotiation, as well as the defiant response to sanctions, to reinforce the argument that sanctions do not work and are in any case unnecessary since some "real change" is underway. The hope evidently is that this will strike a resonance with the positions being argued by Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl et al. In the longer term the regime appears to be calculating that, if it cannot obtain endorsement from the west in advance, a successful re-launching of its "reformed apartheid" strategy will create a new **de facto** reality on which to base a bid to improve

relations with the major western powers. Its strategists appear to recognise to some extent that it was the perception that apartheid was weak that led to increased international pressure in the 1984-6 period. They appear, therefore, to be hoping that a successful strong arm approach will present the world with a **fait accompli** which will restore the credibility of "reformed apartheid" and lead to some new accommodation with the western powers on terms more favourable to the regime.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The present dossier has argued that the political manoeuvres now being initiated in South Africa by the Botha regime are not the beginning of a process of gradually eliminating racist minority rule, but on the contrary part of a continuing attempt to create a new more secure basis to sustain it. There is no doubt that the apartheid regime is now much more confident in its ability to achieve this than it was just before the declaration of the nation-wide State of emergency in June 1986. P.W.Botha is reported to be in good health, enjoying the job of State President and not having any plans for an early retirement.

Nevertheless, active campaigning by other possible successors is underway. F.W. de Klerk, the leader of the Nationalist Party in the Transvaal, is reported to be actively cultivating his television image in an attempt to counter a wide spread view that he is a lightweight. Magnus Malan has definitely now entered the fray with a retired Brigadier, Kobus Bosman, reportedly actively canvassing support for him among members of the Nationalist Party's parliamentary caucus. Gerrit Viljoen is said to be conducting a low keyed campaign. These three are now generally regarded as the main contenders. Chris Heunis' chances are seen to have been much reduced by his poor showing against Dennis Worrall in the May election (Heunis retained his Helderberg seat with a majority of only 39 votes), while R.F. "Pik" Botha is unpopular within the NP caucus and is, in any case, probably unacceptable to the military.

None of this suggests that the leadership of the apartheid regime is seriously contemplating the possibility of a black State President in the foreseeable future.

As argued earlier, all the regime's plans are premised on the assumption that "reformed apartheid" can be made to work. This rests in turn on the calculation that the wave of repression unleashed by the Emergency will make a slightly modified version of the existing "reform" package acceptable to enough "moderate blacks" to enable "power sharing" structures to get off the ground.

There can be no doubt that the Emergency has succeeded in blunting the forward thrust of the mass democratic challenge to apartheid. The conventional wisdom in some quarters is that there

is now a "stalemate" in the struggle between racist minority rule and the forces for a non-racial democracy. Some such assessment of the balance of forces appears to underlie the current strategy of the major imperialist powers, and of the US administration in particular. Their recent proposals to abandon sanctions and push instead for "negotiations" appear to be based on a view that both the regime and the democratic movement are now sufficiently deadlocked for an externally brokered "negotiated settlement" to be possible. The problem for such a strategy, even in its own terms, is that it proposes removing pressure at precisely the moment when the Botha regime is regaining confidence in its own stalled "reformed apartheid" programme. There is no explanation as to how the regime will be brought to accept the need for the transfer of power it has hitherto steadfastly rejected. In reality the proposals of the Reagan administration, Thatcher government, Chancellor Kohl etc. imply letting apartheid off the hook, and giving Botha more time to attempt to advance its "reformed apartheid" programme.

However, while characterisations of the current post-Emergency balance of forces as a stalemate do point to the way in which the Emergency has, momentarily and in some respects at least, blunted the forward thrust of the liberation struggle, they fail to highlight a crucial distinction between the current wave of state repression and that of the 1960s. Despite involving unprecedented levels of repression, the current crackdown has, in sharp contrast to that of the 1960s, manifestly failed to smash popular organisation or struggle inside the country. Although democratic organisations may have been placed on the defensive, most have survived. Strikes, boycotts, demonstrations and armed actions have all continued despite the Emergency, while trade unions and youth organisations have actually grown. It remains, in such a context, extremely unlikely that the regime can succeed in making "reformed apartheid" work on anything but a short term basis. Much depends on the course of the struggle of the democratic movement led by the ANC. What is becoming increasingly clear is that the creators of the apartheid system have no intention of themselves destroying it. That historical task has passed to the hands of those whom apartheid oppresses and exploits.