

SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1980s:

IS VIOLENT CHANGE INEVITABLE?

by

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"The real focus of potential catastrophe is, however, Southern Africa where 35 million blacks are still anachronistically ruled and in some cases grievously oppressed by white minorities, ranging from 19 per cent of the population in South Africa to 5 per cent in Rhodesia. If this anomaly is not corrected gradually and peacefully, it will be corrected suddenly and hideously in years to come. Moreover, far from being bulwarks against Communism, as the white governments claim to be, it is their inflexible adherence to immobility and apartheid which offer the best opportunity for the establishment of eventually triumphant Communist movements in Africa ... Someday Southern Africa will be shockingly and hideously on the front pages of the world press. Then the Western powers will ask themselves why they did not, with all the non-military resources at their command, push and drive South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal into the modern world while there was still time."

(Charles W. Yost, former US Ambassador to the UN, The Conduct and Misconduct of Foreign Affairs, Random House, New York, 1972, p. 133).

"... Unless substantial concessions are made by the white ruling class, it appears inevitable that South Africa will experience some major upheaval in the not too distant future. Such a conflict may easily escalate, perhaps even transforming Southern Africa into the next international battlefield."

(SIPRI, Southern Africa : The Escalation of a Conflict, Praeger, New York, 1976, p. 204).

"Although a negotiated settlement is of course preferable to violence, what is desirable is not likely. While the black majority is taking up the cudgels to liberate itself, Americans should ponder the consequences of our policy toward South Africa, and derive lessons from Iran, where a few months ago the United States did not envision the unfolding events. Americans must be sure that their Government stands four square behind the black majority in South Africa. That is morally right and politically wise, for apartheid is beleaguered, its end in sight."

(James H. Mittelman, Assistant Professor of Political Science & African Studies, Columbia University, New York, "Apartheid Mighty but Doomed", New York Times, Weekly Review, 18 March 1979).

"Some of the members of the U.S. Senate who seem anxious to show solidarity with Ian Smith in Zimbabwe or with the regime in South Africa no doubt believe that geopolitical logic is in perfect agreement with their heartfelt fraternal feelings for the lonely whites of Southern Africa. But African realities are not matters of the heart ... Africa's concern has now become quite businesslike. If the destruction of racism and apartheid in Africa requires the enlistment of Soviet and Cuban help to offset the power of the U.S. Senate, so be it. And if that creates the ideal context for the flowering of Soviet influence that the Senate fears, so be that, too. The contest for the souls of black people in Africa is no longer a matter of sentiment. Africans themselves are now active participants. The contest demands hard reasoning and a commitment to fundamental values. And it most certainly will not be won by reverting to antiquated formulas for global invincibility."

(Stanley Macebuh, Chairman of the editorial board of The Daily Times of Nigeria, "Misreading Opportunities in Africa", Foreign Policy, No. 35, Summer 1979, p. 169.

"I think they [the 'reforms' announced recently by Prime Minister Botha of South Africa dismantling some aspects of 'petty apartheid'] should have come about ten years ago. That is our great tragedy — that we are always a little too late ... It's a choice of reform or war, and I think Botha has chosen reform ... Some of his generals have made the point that they cannot defend 6,000 miles of South African border. The fall of the Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique, brought a bit of reality to our doors and had a tremendous effect on South African thinking. In the same way, the Soweto uprisings brought the point home ... The urban African is all-important, the flash point in South African politics, and you can't leave him out in the cold ... [However] I am still too much of an Afrikaner to favor one man, one vote, so I have to opt for the group approach."

(Floris van Jaarsveld, Professor of History, Pretoria University, in an interview to Newsweek, 15 October 1979, p. 56).

"There can be few countries where dominant elites talk so much of the need for change but do so little to bring it about. Talk of change has indeed become a political tactic in itself, designed on the one hand to keep blacks quiescent and on the other to stave off foreign pressures against apartheid."

(John Kane-Berman, Senior Assistant Editor of the Johannesburg Financial Mail, South Africa : The Method in the Madness, Pluto Press, London, 1979, p. 230.)

"Mr. Botha's aim is to save the essence of 'grand apartheid' — the continued existence of the white South African community — as a geographically separate and self-governing entity which is economically and militarily more powerful than any of the non-white communities. To that end, he is willing to ditch 'petty apartheid', and also to encourage the growth of a black labour aristocracy and a black bourgeoisie in the cities who will sustain the existing industrial economy. He hopes that their privileges will make them grudging allies of the whites against other millions of blacks in the rural homelands. But the homelands must have added credibility and prosperity also if they are not to explode, so more land must be given to them. All that is being done is in defence of the system ..."

(Gwynne Dyer, "Changes in South Africa : Botha's Practical Compromise", Canberra Times, 26 October 1979).

"... How can one assume that blacks in South Africa will commit themselves to peaceful change when the Terrorism Act makes the advocacy of a social change an act of statutory terrorism, punishable by death? ... To black Africa, armed struggle is one of the important though not exclusive instruments of change. Without access to this instrument there could be no hope of realizing the goals of African liberation, and the white regimes and pressure groups within them would see little need to consider seriously black political demands... Blacks will not realistically give up armed struggle as one of the instruments of liberation, so long as white supremacy in South Africa rests so unambiguously on the use of violence to maintain itself."

(Winston Nagan, Associate Professor of Law at the University of Florida, "The US and South Africa : The Limits of 'Peaceful Change'", in Rene Lemarchand (ed.), American Policy in Southern Africa, University Press of America, Washington, D.C., 1978, pp. 206, 232, 233.)

The foregoing quotations from statements made from 1972 to 1979 highlight almost all the aspects of the present crisis-situation in South Africa. These aspects include:

- (a) the fast-evolving domestic situation in South Africa particularly from the Soweto uprising onward;
- (b) the radical changes since 1974 in the regional and global environment in which the apartheid system has had to operate in Southern Africa;
- (c) the increasing realisation on the part of politicised Africans in South Africa that revolutionary violence has to be an essential ingredient of any strategy aimed at overthrowing the white regime in Pretoria;
- (d) the last-ditch attempts by the white regime to save 'grand apartheid' by sacrificing some of the most blatant aspects of 'petty apartheid'; and
- (e) the great potential of Soviet involvement in bringing about change in South Africa if the West, and particularly the US, continues to follow its present, largely ineffective, policy.

It is interesting to note how South Africa's external environment has contributed both to the pace of change within the white-dominated Republic and how the radical transformation of this environment from 1974 onward has affected perceptions of the South African situation on the part of almost all interested parties — both domestic and foreign. It is no wonder therefore that the events of 1974 — the Portuguese revolution and its aftermath — have formed a watershed as far as political developments in Southern Africa in general, and their

impact on South Africa in particular, are concerned. This does not mean, however, that I am in any way underestimating the more specifically domestic factors — economic and political — working for change and revolution within the South African polity. The latter were symbolised most dramatically in the Soweto uprising of 1976 and since then these pressures have intensified. South African Prime Minister Botha's recent concessions on 'petty apartheid' have been made at least partially as a result of these domestic pressures.

However, I have decided to concentrate on South Africa's external environment for two major reasons:

- (a) there are many people in this Conference more qualified than I am to speak about South Africa's domestic situation. Moreover, a number of excellent studies on this subject have appeared recently which marshal all the facts and figures to prove the case that unless the structure of apartheid is dismantled, economic and political factors at work within the Republic will move that country inexorably towards an explosion;
- (b) at the same time, it is also acknowledged that given the tremendous repressive powers of the South African state and its economic and strategic links with important actors in the international arena, attempts at radically transforming the South African society and polity would be largely unsuccessful unless they are related to and draw inspiration from the important changes that have come about in South Africa's regional environment as a result of the post-1974 developments. These changes have not only transformed directly

South Africa's security environment by the removal of Portuguese power in Angola and Mozambique and the impending transformation of Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, they have also had important fall-out effects on the African's perceptions of their own power and of the white regime's 'invincibility' within South Africa itself.

The importance of the post-1974 changes in South-Central Africa were dramatically manifested in Henry Kissinger's Southern African diplomacy in 1976 and his attempts to co-opt Vorster (with the latter agreeing willingly) in an effort to find an 'acceptable' Rhodesian settlement. This was a radical departure from 'Option Two' of the NSSM 39 of 1969 on which US policy towards Southern Africa had been based since the installation of the Nixon-Kissinger team in the White House. Known also as the 'Tar Baby Option', this policy-prescription was based on the assumption that:

The Whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come about is through them. There is no hope for the blacks to gain the political rights they seek through violence, which will only lead to chaos and increased opportunities for the communists. We can, by selective relaxation of our stance towards the white regimes, encourage some modification of their current racial and colonial policies ... Our tangible interests form a basis for our contacts in the region, and these can be maintained at an acceptable political cost.¹

1 Mohamed A. El-Khawas and Barry Cohen (ed.), The Kissinger Study of Southern Africa : National Security Study Memorandum 39, Lawrence Hill & Co., Westport, Connecticut, 1976.

The events in Angola and Mozambique and the intensification of guerrilla activity in Zimbabwe changed all that. This was why Kissinger's oft-quoted speech in Lusaka, Zambia, on 27 April 1976 was a far cry from NSSM 39. In this speech, the US Secretary of State affirmed that

The United States is totally dedicated to seeing to it that the majority becomes the ruling power in Rhodesia ... The Salisbury regime must understand that it cannot expect United States support either in diplomacy or in material help at any stage in its conflict with African states or African liberation movements ... We reiterate our call upon the South African government to permit all the people and groups of Namibia to express their views freely, under UN supervision, on the political future and constitutional structure of their country.

On South Africa itself, however, Kissinger was much more equivocal:

A peaceful end to institutionalised inequality is in the interest of all South Africans. The United States will continue to encourage and work for peaceful change. Our policy toward South Africa is based upon the premise that within a reasonable time we shall see a clear evolution toward equality of opportunity and basic human rights for all South Africans ... The United States will exercise all its efforts in that direction.²

This change in the US attitude towards Southern Africa was, of course, primarily the result of having 'lost' Angola and Mozambique and its attempt to prevent the 'loss' of Zimbabwe and Namibia as well.

The radical (in fact, fundamental) changes in Southern Africa's external environment has, of course, had a profound impact on its domestic environment as well — it has on the

2 ibid., pp. 187, 188, 189.

one hand acted as a great morale-booster for the African majority and, on the other, strengthened two apparently contradictory trends within the dominant White majority. On the one hand, events in the region (or rather the pressure of Western, particularly American, opinion which itself has been the result of events on South Africa's borders) have forced Pretoria to contemplate making some concessions in order to smoothen out the rougher edges of 'petty apartheid'; on the other, it has strengthened the laager mentality of the South African Whites which is manifested in their staunch refusal to give way on any fundamental point relating to 'grand apartheid', and the acceleration of the process by which the African majority is expected to be 'Bantustanized', thereby creating, at least in terms of legal fiction, a white majority in the Republic of South Africa.

This combination of factors and developments is bound to bring the South African situation to the boiling point, sooner or later — and sooner rather than later. The Soweto uprising, it has been argued by some, was merely a flash in the pan. However, it could as well be the tip of an enormous iceberg.

The latter proposition seems closer to the truth: South Africa, increasingly isolated within its own laager, provides for students of conflict an almost ideal type situation for study and analysis. It is a situation where all possible components of conflict — domestic, regional and international as well as those based on race and class — are concentrated and in large measure. This is why when South Africa blows up,

it may become the conflict of the 1980s, before which all other preoccupations of today's conflict managers may pale into insignificance.

This is where South Africa's changed regional environment — and the example set by the methods by which these changes have been brought about — becomes very important. The liberation of Mozambique and Angola and the increased pace of transformation in Zimbabwe and Namibia holds significant lessons for those interested in transforming Southern Africa into Azania. For what is important is not only the fact that Angola and Mozambique have gained independence and Zimbabwe and Namibia are well on their way to achieving full statehood. What is even more important, armed revolutionaries have performed vital roles in the liberation of these countries, either by taking over power as in Angola or Mozambique — or even earlier by contributing to the Portuguese revolution itself, for as Antonio de Spínola himself admitted the colonial wars had brought Portugal in 1974 to a state of physical and neurological exhaustion — or by forcing white regimes — as in Zimbabwe and Namibia — to seriously pursue the option of an 'internal' settlement with 'moderate' black leaders. In the latter case, it has been only the existence of guerrilla forces that has forced the white regimes to accept the less radical among the African leaders as 'moderates' and to attempt to transfer power to these elements.

The lesson of all this, one is sure, has not been lost on the politically-aware sections of the black majority in South Africa. It is expected to make the guerrilla option

more tempting for them in the early 1980s, particularly when friendly governments around the borders of South Africa would be available to provide them with sanctuaries and act as conduits for the supply of arms. The key-role of Mozambique and of liberated Zimbabwe and Namibia in this context cannot be under-estimated. In the latter two instances the Patriotic Front and SWAPO would, in addition, have their own scores to settle with Pretoria. Mozambique, despite the 75,000/migrant labourers that it currently supplies to South Africa, would also be under intense domestic and regional pressure to act as a safe-haven for the Azanian revolutionaries. Reprisal attacks carried out on Mozambique by South Africa would only help to strengthen the former's resolve to extend support to the guerrillas.

Moreover, the whole weight of the African states, the OAU, and its Liberation Committee, will be on the side of the guerrillas. Given the enormity of the stakes involved, one cannot effectively rule out even the use of Nigerian oil for political ends in an escalating South African conflict.

But it is not merely the regional African environment that has undergone such tremendous change as to give future Azanian revolutionaries a significant degree of confidence and hope. Equally important changes have taken place at the global level also, especially as they pertain to super power competition and presence in the third world, and more particularly in Africa. It would be interesting and instructive to compare the situation in 1960 (the year of Sharpville) with the obtaining in 1976 (the year of Soweto) in this respect. In 1960 the Soviet

Union had not yet developed a global reach, either diplomatically or militarily, and certainly not as far as Africa was concerned. Almost the entire continent, except for Egypt, was a Western preserve and the great powers of the West, led by the US, had a major stake in preserving the status quo in Southern Africa.

By the mid-1970s all that had changed drastically. The contrast was nowhere more evident than in the contrasting Soviet reactions to the events during the Congo crisis of 1960-64 and those in the Angolan crisis of 1975-76. While the first demonstrated Soviet impotence very clearly, the second was a demonstration of the political and military prowess Moscow had built up over a decade. Soviet support, although considerably muted currently, to elements within the Zimbabwe Patriotic Front and SWAPO as well as Moscow's links with some elements of the ANC of South Africa are further instances of the Soviet Union's increasing global reach.

With this change in the super power equation, again especially as it pertains to Africa, and particularly the African perception of the change, the militant Azanian nationalists are very likely to come to the conclusion that (given the balance of forces in the region) they have a much better chance of reaching their political objective in the 1980s than they have ever had before. The prospect of Soviet help in this process (even if at one remove through Cuba or the frontline African states) would help boost the morale and change the ethos of the Azanian resistance, to the extent that a military confrontation with the white regime, on balance, would definitely appear an attractive option. This stage might be reached by the mid-1980s and the latter half

of the next decade might then witness a qualitative escalation of armed guerilla and commando activity in Southern Africa leading to a full-scale armed insurrection.

Now for a look at the otherside of the coin, viz., Western, and particularly US, policy towards the build up of a crisis situation in South Africa, say in the mid-1980s. Given past patterns of Western, and especially American, behaviour towards such crisis situations in Southern-Central Africa and given present trends, one can reasonably assume that the South African crisis might, once again, eventuate in major Western reverses. This projection is based on past patterns when Western, and particularly US, support for colonial and settler-colonial regimes in the region bordering South Africa has been reluctantly withdrawn only when it was too late, and was, therefore, not able to make much impression upon the regional African actors. If the same pattern is repeated (and on present indications that is the most likely possibility) in the case of South Africa, similar results may be expected to follow. In fact, given the dimensions of the projected conflict and the degree of its intensity, the South African conflagration is likely to affect African sentiments in the rest of the continent in a way that the Rhodesian or Angolan episodes were never quite able to do. Moreover, given the strategic location of South Africa between the South Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, and its vast reservoir of strategic minerals, the loss for the West would be much more critical than, say, the coming to power of pro-Soviet regimes in Angola and Mozambique, or even in Zimbabwe.

Therefore, unless there is a sharp break from the traditional pattern of Western policies and postures — and that also soon — on the South African issue there seems to be very little possibility that the familiar pattern of conflict-escalation and Western response would repeat itself. This pattern has been summed up very succinctly by R.W. Johnson who has argued that

the threats to which white regimes have responded have been military. If this were again to be the case with South Africa one should not expect US pressure to become effective until South Africa is threatened by a very considerable deterioration in the military position which she enjoys today. It is difficult to see this deterioration taking place without the help of a greatly strengthened Soviet presence in the Southern African region. But, of course, the stronger the Soviet presence becomes the less the US will wish to weaken her strongest ally in the region. Yet there is not much point in expecting the US to pre-empt such a situation by acting firmly before she 'needs' to.

Johnson goes on to state that

The West effectively ignored the Rhodesian 'problem' until the rise of a black guerrilla movement grew to offer a 'solution' they liked even less than they did Smith. It is likely to be the same story with South Africa. While the regime remains strong, profitable involvement and (deliberately) ineffectual abhorrence will go hand in hand. But the emergence of a real threat to the regime will concentrate minds quite wonderfully.³

It is in this context of the overall pattern of Western policy that nearly all academic discussion of the effectiveness of Western policy to bring about changes in South Africa through sanctions or otherwise fits in. At the one end of

3 R.W. Johnson, How Long Will South Africa Survive? Macmillan, London, 1977, pp. 322, 324.

the spectrum there are people like George Ball and Richard E. Bissell arguing for greater 'communication' (meaning greater economic and, possibly, military interaction) with the dominant white elite of South Africa, ostensibly in order to persuade them to change their ways.⁴ At the other end of the spectrum are well-meaning liberals like Clyde Ferguson and William R. Cotter who argue that the US

can, by using selected pressures, increase the cost of Afrikaner intransigence, support the internal efforts of blacks and, perhaps, cause moderate whites in the society to take to the streets in civil disobedience against what will surely be increasingly harsh restrictions on their own freedoms ... On the other hand, the US must also stand ready to 'loosen the screws' and offer 'carrots' when there are signs of real change on the part of South Africa's whites.⁵

Somewhere in between stand the 'pragmatists' who argue that given the

considerations and constraints surrounding them, while continuing to search actively for reform in South Africa, the Western States will probably do so within the frameworks of the three central lines of policy we have defined — communication, disengagement and pressure for reform. These options are, of course, not always in harmony with each other, so it is likely that Western policy will shift between them over time ... The shifts of policy and the different emphases will depend upon such variables as the values and beliefs of the particular Western governments; the pressures to which they are subjected by organised parties and groups; the state of their own economies and of the international economy generally; and

4 George Ball, 'Asking for Trouble in South Africa', *Atlantic Monthly*, October ~~23~~ 1977, pp. 43-51; Richard E. Bissell, *Southern Africa in the World: Autonomy or Interdependence?* Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 1978. George Ball is a former US Under-Secretary of State and presently an investment banker; Richard Bissell is Managing Editor of *Orbis*.

5 Clyde Ferguson and William R. Cotter, 'South Africa: What is to be Done', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, January 1978, pp. 273-274 (emphasis in the original).

the international political and strategic situation, including the whole range of international problems, dilemmas and issues which seize the attention of governments. A further, and most important factor, will be the development of the situation on the ground in South Africa - either forcing the pace towards a more radical approach on the part of the Western powers, or enabling them to allow the problem to simmer without boiling.⁶

This statement is an example of 'waffling' par excellence. However, possibly unwittingly, Barber and Spicer have given us a clue to the unfolding of Western policy in the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above. For in that they concede that a 'radical' Western policy (implying effective pressure on Pretoria) will only come about if the situation on the ground in South Africa undergoes radical change; otherwise they would be happy to 'allow the problem to simmer without boiling.'

This takes us back to my original contention that an active anti-apartheid Western policy can emerge only if African guerrilla activity has reached the level where it begins to seriously threaten the Afrikaner regime and hurt Western economic and strategic interests. This, as experience has proved in the past, might be too late as far as major Western interests in the area are concerned since to reach that stage the nationalist guerrillas would not only have to radicalise internally but also become heavily dependent both upon the Soviet Union directly and upon frontline regimes friendly to the Soviet Union. While as a result of Western pressure and intervention at that stage à la Rhodesia an 'internal' settlement might be reached in

6 James Barber and Michael Spicer, 'Sanctions Against South Africa: Options for the West', International Affairs, Vol. 55, No. 3, July 1979, p. 401.

Pretoria, it is extremely doubtful if that settlement would be any more viable or credible than its Salisbury counterpart has been. But irrespective of the success or failure of such an internal settlement the inevitability of revolutionary violence in leading to such a scenario is implied and assumed by both the supporters and opponents of revolutionary guerrilla warfare in Southern Africa. For without the injection of this factor into the South African scene, it appears that 'grand apartheid' will continue to rule the roost and those (Western) powers with the greatest leverage on Pretoria will continue to remain in a state of immobility. Also, given South Africa's fast changing regional environment, it may not be too unrealistic to speculate that it would not be too long before this factor is injected in large doses into the South African body-politic.

As for the 'liberal' Ferguson-Cotter approach: while the attempt is commendable it does not take adequately into account the intensity of feeling on both - and particularly the African - sides; nor does it comprehend the drastic reduction in the time-scale in which the desired changes in South Africa have to be brought about. It also does not fully realise that the South African conflict has been turned virtually into a zero-sum game by the dominant White elite since the coming to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948. This is why the 'carrot and stick' approach (with a big carrot and a small stick) is no longer workable. This is also the reason why the belated advocacy of 'pluralism' by Harry Oppenheimer and others of his ilk will not work either. They will not work because the concessions on 'petty apartheid' or a 'pluralistic' federation of all the 'tribes' of South Africa (including the 'white tribe')

are no longer perceived by the African majority as voluntary concessions made by an all-powerful and secure Afrikaner elite. They are, on the other hand, perceived as the last desperate attempts by the dominant minority to postpone the day of reckoning and to subvert the concept of one man one vote by substituting the 'multi-tribal' federation (with the 'white tribe' continuing to be dominant) in its place. This sea-change in African perception of the South African political reality owes a great deal to events that have taken place immediately across South Africa's borders. The demonstration effect of these events and the increasing possibility that these newly-liberated states can form effective rear bases for Azanian guerrillas has brought about changes in the African political calculation which, in the absence of these events, would have taken possibly a generation to occur. Southern Africa in 1979 is a vastly changed subcontinent from what it was in 1970 or even in 1974. This is a reality which policy-makers of all the external powers interested in finding a solution to the impending South African crisis must fully comprehend.