

BUMBLING ALONG

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South Africa has achieved political democracy but the big challenge still lies ahead of us. The route is fraught with dangers. A look at the current political, social and economic map of the country indicates that we are bumbling along a middle road scenario towards a mixed First World-Third World society which could, with sound management, lead to further development and stable democracy.

It is difficult for even the most astute observer to discern patterns in the political economy of a rapidly changing society. This is particularly so when personalities are so vitally important in shaping the larger outcomes. Whenever we focus on personalities, we are likely to be surprised by the vagaries of human behaviour.

Who would have expected dramatic changes from the pre-1990 FW de Klerk? Not only was he perceived as conservative, but as one of his close associates remarked: "The problem with De Klerk is not that he is reactionary but that he refuses to take decisions."

Yet this same De Klerk launched a programme of reform which has left all of us amazed. Similarly, the future of South Africa will be shaped largely by the actions and inactions of a handful of leaders: Nelson Mandela, De Klerk and Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

Whereas in developed societies such as the United States or Britain it doesn't really matter who is in charge, in a politically developing society such as South Africa, it does. Indeed, the single most important factor which will determine our future will be the quality of our leadership.

But leaders do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of the polity and the value system of their societies. The political landscape provides a context of restraints and opportunities. Now that the elections are over, it is possible to discern the contours of this political landscape, or power map.

The power map

It has been said that the results of the April elections are 'designer results'. What is meant by this is that the results are as conducive to a democratic future as is possible under our unique circumstances.

With the best intentions in the world, nothing is more dangerous for a democratic system than a landslide victory where the victor is likely to remain in power for a long time. Although the African National Congress (ANC) emerged from the elections as the clear winner, its power is limited by the following:

- The failure of the ANC to win a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Although even a simple majority enables the winning party to ride roughshod over its rivals, a two-thirds majority conveys the wrong message to the winners and may encourage them to treat the losers with disdain. Psychologically it was very important for no party to win the magic two-thirds majority and the right to write the constitution unilaterally;
- The success of the National Party (NP) in obtaining more than 20% of the total vote and in winning majority support from the white, coloured and Asian communities. Not only did this entitle the NP to occupy a deputy presidency and important cabinet positions, but psychologically it ensures that an opposition party has crossed an important barrier which marks the difference between at least a partial victory and total defeat;

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Arthur Bozas

Opposition victories in two provinces will ensure that real restraints exist on central government power

The political balance of power reduces the possibilities of clashes between the state bureaucracy and the new political elite

- The failure of the ANC to win control over two of the three most important provinces. The convincing NP win in the Western Cape and the somewhat surprising victory of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in KwaZulu-Natal will balance the power of the ANC in the other seven provinces and ensure that real restraints exist on central government power;
- As a result of these electoral outcomes, other balancing mechanisms become more important. The Government of National Unity (GNU) could never be a substitute for electoral performance. If the ANC had achieved a massive victory at the polls and no other party had achieved a credible level of voter support, the GNU would have been an empty shell from the very beginning.
- Now at least the junior partners will have real clout. Similarly the constitutional principles agreed upon during multi-party negotiations and new institutions such as the Constitutional Court take on a new lease of life.
- The political balance of power probably also reduces the possibilities of clashes between the state bureaucracy, including the security services, and the new political elite. Had the ANC been the only major parliamentary player, tensions and conflicts may have developed with the

white dominated and conservative public sector.

The South African power map, then, can be summarised as follows: all but two players - the ANC and the NP - were eliminated from national politics. At the provincial level the IFP is a major player because of its victory in KwaZulu-Natal, but its national aspirations have been shattered, probably permanently.

What about the losers? It is a dangerous exercise to attempt to predict the political future, but is difficult to conceive of any circumstances which could lead to the resurrection of the Democratic Party (DP), Freedom Front (FF) or Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

These parties seem to have been struck a mortal blow and are likely to lose much of their already limited electoral support. Given a widespread perception that their growth prospects are limited, they are unlikely to attract the resources, especially finances, which are so necessary in today's politics.

The options

Although we cannot predict the future, we can outline the central issues and isolate the factors which will shape outcomes. Perhaps the most important questions are whether the polity will be stable, the new democracy will survive the new challenges and what policies, especially socio-economic, the new Government will adopt.

The answer to these questions will determine South Africa's future. We may summarise the four possible outcomes as follows:

□ *The Rwanda option*

South Africa disintegrates as a cooperative society and is dominated by conflict and violence. The road to this outcome would lie in the failure of the leadership to contain regional conflicts, such as the power struggle in KwaZulu-Natal, and a breakdown in the functioning of the GNU. Armed force would become the arbiter of conflicts.

□ *The Zambian option*

South Africa slides gradually into stagnation, decay and corruption. Endemic violence would not be the defining characteristic. Instead the nature of the South African society would change to one dominated by Third World elements. The First World oriented elites who presently dominate the South African political economy would gradually be displaced by Third World oriented elites, practices and policies.

❑ *The stumbling along option*

South Africa is a mixed First World-Third World society in which democratisation increases the Third World influences on the political economy in the short term but does not destroy the First World component.

Under this scenario, South Africa would continue to make significant economic progress and the democratic ideal would not be extinguished. However, the process would remain tenuous and a strong Third World element would continue to exist and would limit economic and political prospects.

❑ *The Singapore option*

This entails rapid progress towards a predominantly First World society in which the Third World components would be steadily reduced. In time, high levels of socio-economic development attained makes the survival of a First World democratic system unproblematic.

South Africa is not unique in facing these issues. From a global perspective, we can find some of the answers by investigating the level of socio-economic development that exists in the society, and how the political winners and losers behave.

Development

The level of socio-economic development is a critical determinant of political success or failure. Levels of literacy, income per head and urbanisation largely determine whether a society will be a stable or an unstable democracy. Comparisons indicate that we can differentiate between three levels of development:

- Highly developed societies characterised by high levels of literacy, affluence and large urban complexes. With very few exceptions, these societies also have stable democratic systems of government;
- Middle income societies characterised by a strong, modern First World sector co-existing alongside a large Third World sector. An important section of the population is literate and relatively affluent, but another important section is not. A stable and democratic system of government is possible but not probable;
- Underdeveloped societies with low levels of economic development and very limited literacy. With very few exceptions, these societies are neither democratic nor genuinely stable.

If South Africa was either highly developed

or highly underdeveloped, we could confidently predict its political destiny, at least in the short term.

For example, we can predict that politically at least the United States and Germany will not be very different from their present realities in five years time. We can be equally confident, alas, that Malawi, despite the present euphoria, will not be a stable democracy in five years time.

The middle category of partially developed states are the most difficult to understand because their destinies are not socio-economically determined. In these cases, it is the quality of the leadership which is critical, particularly the actions of the winners and the losers of the political game.

The winners

Perhaps the single most important factor determining the political future of middle level societies is the behaviour of the political winners. Do they continue to play the game according to the rules? Are they magnanimous towards the losers? Do they adopt and implement sensible policies?

Part of the key answer to understanding political behaviour lies in the arena of predispositions. If the ANC has a secret agenda to subvert the polity and implement populist policies, no constitution or court will be able to frustrate them.

However, the disastrous consequences for the ANC and its constituency of such policies has probably been perceived during the learning experience of the last four years. We are therefore not dealing with a group with a sinister and hidden agenda.

No democratic society can base its survival on trust, however. Political power needs to be limited and constrained by countervailing powers. As I outlined earlier, our 'designer' elections produced an outcome favourable to a democratic South Africa.

The ANC-dominated government is faced with powerful political forces outside of its control in the GNU as well as in the regional governments of the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and several of the ANC dominated provinces. It does not have the luxury of a blank cheque in either making policy or implementing its decisions.

As significant in constraining government is the domestic and global context in which government operates. It is almost universally recognised that no state can go it alone in the 1990s.

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Cooperation rather than confrontation will be the only path to economic reconstruction and development

If the Government is to deliver its promises to its key constituencies, it has to be fully reincorporated into the global political economy. Only full reincorporation will lead to the necessary foreign investments, access to the key markets of Europe, North America and Asia, and support from global economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs.

Similarly, control over Parliament does not automatically imply control over all the power points of South African society. The public bureaucracy, including the police and military, remain outside the unchallenged control of the ANC. Civil society, especially the media, the professions and business, civic associations and trade unions, value their independence greatly.

Thus power is not what it used to be. The NP in 1948, with almost no support among black people, only minority support among the white electorate and very little sympathy abroad, could use its small parliamentary majority to grab control of the state and transform society.

The ANC, with much greater popular support, is unable to lead but can only persuade. An ANC attempt to impose its will on South Africa would have disastrous consequences - not least for itself.

Cooperation rather than confrontation will be the only path to achieving ANC goals such as economic reconstruction and development. President Mandela's speech at the opening of Parliament showed that most ANC leaders are fully aware of these brutal realities.

The losers

The political losers often pose an even more serious threat to democracy and stability. Unlike the winners, they frequently have a vested interest in the failure of government and public policies. In many cases the failure of democratic government creates opportunities for power which would not otherwise be available to political minorities.

We are perhaps fortunate in South Africa that the election outcome was, with the exception of KwaZulu-Natal, so decisive. Both the white right, represented by the Freedom Front, and the black 'left', represented by the PAC, were demolished and at present do not pose any real threat to the democratic order.

It also seems improbable that their supporters will take up arms against the state or engage in other forms of illegal opposition on any significant scale. The psychological consequences of their political rout have been overwhelming and their ranks have become thoroughly demoralised.

The future consequences of the policies of the IFP remain more problematic. The end of Inkatha's dream of being a major national player may contribute to national reconciliation if rational considerations shape their policies. The elections showed that the IFP is exclusively a regional party.

The situation in KwaZulu-Natal is more complex, partly because the power struggle has not been decisively resolved. Although the IFP was granted 51% of the final vote, the ANC and others claimed widespread irregularities. The situation is aggravated by

Political losers often pose a serious threat to democracy and stability, since they frequently have a vested interest in the failure of government

tensions and passions inherent in a situation of a 10-year struggle which has claimed the lives of thousands of people on both sides of the political divide.

Outside of KwaZulu-Natal, the IFP has representatives in only one provincial parliament. The party leadership is unlikely to view itself as a possible national government in any future election, and this gives the IFP the incentive to cooperate as a minor partner in the ANC-dominated Government, while hoping that the Government stumbles and creates new opportunities for the expansion of opposition support.

But the logic of cooperation created by the balance of forces at the national level may be overturned by the dynamics of personalities or by the negative dynamics which may flow from unresolved regional conflicts.

The danger exists that conflict will continue in the region and that these conflicts may spill over into the GNU, destroying the national dialogue. Tragically the reverse dynamic does not exist: cooperation at the centre does not seem to influence regional conflicts.

Conflict

Politics is about conflict and democracy can be viewed as a mechanism for resolving conflicts peacefully. One consequence of our 'uhuru' elections is that the conflict issues are blurred.

Because the election was between the 'old order' and the 'liberation' party, both the ANC and the NP represent constellations of disparate and perhaps irreconcilable interests. When the great realignment takes place, what will the conflicts be and how will they be expressed?

□ *Ethnic conflict*

Of all the potentially destructive conflicts which may tear a society asunder, ethnic conflicts are the most difficult to manage successfully. Because ethnicity is at least partly determined by contextual factors, conflicts based upon ethnic factors can take several forms.

In South Africa, ethnic conflicts could pit blacks against whites (the two society model) or could involve several less inclusive groupings such as Xhosa and Zulu speakers (the multi-national model).

□ *Economic conflict*

Economic conflicts do not necessarily entail

irreconcilable interest conflicts, but they can threaten the fabric of society by inhibiting economic growth and cooperation. The management of potential economic conflict is the foundation of all sound economic systems.

In South Africa the uneasy coexistence of nominal political equality with vast levels of economic inequality poses particularly severe challenges to government. Conflicts between business and trade unions, land owners and squatters, and in general the haves and the have nots, always contain the threat of dramatic escalation.

This has been confirmed by the recent strikes in the retail sector, where passions raised were disproportionate to the actual issues involved. Policies such as affirmative action, privatisation and land reform are particularly explosive.

□ *Political conflict*

Although politics is about conflict, successful democracies have discovered mechanisms to ensure that conflicts do not reach a level where the stability and even existence of the political framework itself is under threat. Political contestation is restricted largely to policy outcomes rather than the nature of politics itself.

In South Africa a legitimate framework has yet to be created. The ability of a GNU to contain destructive conflicts remains uncertain. The division and sharing of powers between the different levels of government has yet to be determined. And the vital machinery of state will have to meet the challenges to its efficient functions from new political elites, ambitious state policies and affirmative action programmes.

Prospects

In this article I have tried to provide a 'road map' rather than a prediction of our future. We cannot yet answer the key questions I raised about stability, democracy and rationality of our future polity and policy. Even a cursory look at the potential for conflict in our society can only make even an optimist cautious.

However, on balance the omens are encouraging. We have survived a difficult transition and a traumatic election in reasonably good shape. The power balance between the political groups is favourable and the last four years have been useful in teaching all our political players some of the facts of our new reality.

If we relate these factors to our earlier brief outline of possible futures, the following

The danger exists that conflict in KwaZulu-Natal will continue, and may spill over into the government, destroying the national dialogue

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The political elites have every incentive to cooperate and seem to have learned the unacceptable costs of unregulated conflicts

It is difficult to envisage circumstances under which the First World elements could be dislodged

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tentative conclusions can be reached.

The Rwanda option seems unlikely for several reasons. Firstly, the conflicts in South Africa do not create the inevitability of intractable ethnic, religious or racial conflicts. While the potential for such conflicts does exist, they are mitigated by other factors such as the absence of one numerically dominant ethnic community and the salience of economic and other material issues.

In addition, the incumbent political elites have every incentive to cooperate with other members of the political elite, and seem to have learned the unacceptable costs of unregulated conflicts.

The Zambian option also seems unlikely. Despite the socio-economic disparities in South Africa and the possibility that a majority of the population is rooted in Third World poverty and deprivation, the state and society seem to be firmly under the control of a multi-racial first world elite.

While it is probable that Third World influence will increase, it is difficult to envisage circumstances under which the First World elements could be dislodged. South Africa differs from almost all its neighbours precisely because its First World component, both black and white, is so large and firmly entrenched.

The Singapore scenario also seems unlikely. The prospects for economic growth are relatively modest and the size of the Third World community, coupled with very high birth rates, makes the rapid growth of First World elements unlikely. The apartheid legacy compounds the problem because it makes adopting economically optimal policies politically unviable.

The most likely future is therefore going to be along the road of stumbling towards a mixed First World-Third World society. This road contains many dangers but seems to lead towards the gradual strengthening of the First World elements of our society. The major dangers include:

- The incapacitation or death of President Mandela;
- The legacy of the past which new institutions such as the Truth Commission could politicise with potentially destructive consequences;
- Breakdown in political cooperation. The GNU is only a mechanism designed to achieve a level of inter-party cooperation and ensure that the political system is not endangered. Its breakdown would not by

itself destroy political stability, but the end of coalition government would encourage parties to place their own interests above any interest in stability and continuity. The inevitable tensions could undermine the system itself;

- Unwise state economic policies, based upon a populism which sacrifices long term gains for short term applause. Policies of state income, expenditure and affirmative action are particularly vulnerable to populist expansion; and
- Mobilised special interests which have the power to ensure that their interests prevail over national and weaker interests. It is possible that powerful interests such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions will force a weak Government to follow popular but costly policies which destroy macro-economic balance and harm the interests of the least privileged, and hence weakest, sections of society such as the unemployed and rural peasantry.

One factor does give rise to some concern: the absence of an alternative government to the ANC. Good government demands a strong opposition. While the present balance of power is a good beginning, it is difficult to see which of the existing parties could provide a credible future alternative to an ANC Government.

It is unlikely that the NP, with its historical legacy as a white Afrikaner party, can achieve significant black support. None of the other parties, including the IFP, DP and PAC, seem to have significant growth prospects. The interim constitution makes it difficult for party rebels to split because to do so would force them to resign from Parliament.

As a result, despite the desirability of a great realignment away from the present system-versus-struggle party alignments, it is difficult to see how this could come about. And unless it does, it seems unlikely that the ANC majority will be seriously threatened.

Managing change is never an easy task. Managing change in a democracy is even more difficult to do successfully. However, the record of our leaders and communities in adjusting to change is almost miraculous.

Even five years ago, few of us would have believed our society had the capacity to adjust to the radical changes which have recently taken place. Yet we have done so reasonably well. The biggest challenge now lies ahead of us. We will not get another second chance. **IPWA**