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SOUTH AFRICA AND NEGOTIATIONS: NEW HOPE OR FALSE DAWN?

RECENT EVENTS

One view of the recent political developments inside and outside South Africa, which seem to be pushing and pulling all parties toward the negotiation table is that nothing has changed until everything has changed. But that is the cynical view and there is no doubt that the political landscape in South Africa has changed dramatically. The real question remaining is: where are we going?

Since early August a number of events have assisted the concept "negotiation" to become the new vogue word. These include:

The African National Congress statement on negotiations issued in August.

The Organisation of African Unity's "Harare Declaration" on August 21.

The release of eight long term political prisoners, including the former General Secretary of the ANC, Walter Sisulu.

The address by State President F.W. De Klerk to a National Party conference in Pretoria on October 21.

The rally at Soccer City on October 29 which was widely regarded as the first ANC mass meeting inside South Africa for almost 30 years.

SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

The significance of these events cannot be dismissed. They indicate a new desire to end the South African conflict even though all parties remain committed to a settlement on their own terms.

The events further signify an implicit admission on the part of the government that the punitive economic measures adopted by the international community against the country are beginning to bite. As regards the ANC, the events signify a shift from the hardline position on negotiations adopted at

the organisation's consultative conference at Kabwe, Zambia, in 1985 to a more moderate position. Taken together with the ANC's constitutional guidelines issued late last year, the ANC is clearly in the process of adjusting its strategies to prepare solid and clearly formulated positions on the issue of negotiating a peaceful transfer of political power to the black majority.

Finally, they reflect the changing nature of superpower relationships, as well as the new emphasis on domestic priorities evident particularly in the Soviet Union. These developments will curtail the past practice of parties to regional conflicts of playing off one superpower against another.

But, however significant recent developments in both camps may be, the \$64 000 question remains: where are we going?

PROSPECTS

While there is little doubt that both the major protagonists in the South African drama - the government and the ANC/Mass Democratic Movement alliance - desire a negotiated settlement, neither is yet willing to move from its respective "preferred outcomes". For the government this implies a settlement based on the group concept with the white population somehow retaining control of the political system while surrendering some power to a co-opted black leadership.

For the ANC/MDM a negotiated settlement implies a universal adult suffrage system in a unitary state with protections/rights enshrined on an individual rather than group basis and in a unitary state.

The two positions are obviously poles apart, and other key players, such as the Pan Africanist Congress, the Black Consciousness Movements (internal and exiled) and Inkatha, have not even been brought into the process yet. And as regards the PAC and BCMs the issue is further complicated by the fact they must be brought into a process to which they are fundamentally opposed.

Thus prospects for a negotiated settlement do not appear to be substantial in the short term.

To advance negotiations all parties will have to accept certain principles crucial to any negotiation process:

- * that outright victory is not possible or the cost of such victory is too high
- * that no party is able to achieve its objectives without the help of its rivals
- * that no party can dictate the outcome

There is no evidence to suggest that either of the major protagonists have accepted these principles let alone other organisations such as the PAC and BCM.

Each of the parties involved in the South African

conflict still believes that outright victory is possible. Consider the statement by State President de Klerk at the October 21 National Party conference to the effect that the ANC cannot be part of the bargaining process until the organisation renounces the use of violence. De Klerk made the demand fully aware of the fact that the ANC cannot comply without alienating a significant section of its support base.

In its "guidelines on negotiation" the ANC spells out certain preconditions, such as the unbanning of the ANC, the suspension of all political trials, the release of ALL political detainees (this would include those recently convicted of treason in the so-called Delmas 22 Trial) and the total removal of security forces from black townships. These demands were restated without modification at the Soccer City rally on October 29 but the government cannot meet these demands without damaging its own power base.

Despite the conciliatory tone of its Harare Declaration, the OAU clearly supports the ANC "preconditions" and spells them out in detail in the section of the declaration dealing with the creation of a negotiation climate. The OAU makes specific mention of its continued support for the armed struggle and calls for intensified economic sanctions, a call the ANC and PAC have made repeatedly in recent weeks.

The release of the "Sisulu Eight" is widely regarded in the ANC and MDM as a deliberate government ploy to divide the ANC by creating a "second" de facto ANC with separate leadership inside the country without formally legalising its presence.

A careful analysis of ANC statements and, more important, comments and observations made in private, indicate that a strong body of opinion exists within the ANC/MDM that recent government concessions (protest marches allowed, the releases, the rally) occurred as a direct result of pressure, and that, if such pressure is maintained and intensified, then more meaningful concessions can be squeezed out of Pretoria.

On the other side the government reportedly has three plans for negotiation. The first bypasses the exiled movements entirely; the second intends to weaken and divide black opposition resulting in a more credible co-opted black leadership; and only the third alternative involves "genuine" negotiations. The government seems currently to be somewhere between the first and second alternative and a long way from the third.

The bottom line is that both major protagonists still perceive themselves to be strong enough to determine the preconditions for negotiations and dictate the outcome.

In such circumstances the glimmer of hope for a negotiated settlement must remain just that for the time being, no more than a glimmer.

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