

The Launch of a New South Africa

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Ten years ago this spring, South Africa shed its skin. I travelled there in May of 1993 to work as part of the United Nations Observer Mission, constituted to support the South Africans in quelling the violence that plagued the country and to assist in the transition to a democratic society. In May of 1994, several days after Nelson Mandela's inauguration as president of the country, I returned home. Over those twelve months, South Africa underwent a shift of seismic proportion. A decade later, I find myself re-visiting the changes of that year.

The task before the country was to construct a broadly egalitarian multi-racial political and social structure from the ashes of the racist apartheid system. Technically abolished three years earlier, official apartheid no longer existed by the time I landed in Johannesburg. My African colleagues and I went to restaurants and the theatre together, my gym was thoroughly racially mixed, the African National Congress and the National Party were negotiating for a new government, the economy was opening up to black business ownership and there were black television personalities. Even the enormous chasm defining residential segregation was sprouting small fissures. But of course, apartheid's legacy was everywhere: at the time, I said it was as though apartheid now comprised the entirety of one's peripheral vision. Looking directly, it wasn't, officially, there.

The ultimate chapter in the evolution from apartheid state to multi-racial democracy, seen as wholly inevitable from the perch of history, was nevertheless by no means assured that year. I wonder how many people who were not there remember just how unstable things were. Or remember, on the other hand, the determination of the majority of South Africans to prevent defeat by the spoilers, of which there were many, and whom, it must be said, were both white and black. When looking at the dire and seemingly intractable problems of the many countries struggling to find stability in the wake of autocracy and worse, the against-the-odds successes of South Africa then fill me with amazement still.

By the spring of 93, the white Government of the National Party and the most prominent black liberation organisation, the African National Congress (ANC) had renewed talks begun in 1990 aimed at establishing multilateral structures to shepherd in the new South Africa. These talks had broken down more than once but mechanisms for change had been put in place. At the national level there was a Negotiating Forum, tasked with drafting a new Constitution and setting up transitional structures, a pre-requisite to holding the first elections for a fully enfranchised populace. There was also the National Peace Accord (NPA), a highly detailed document providing the framework for furthering peace and advancing democracy -- signed in 1991 by the ANC, the South African Government and a number of other political parties and trade unions. The NPA had put in place a system of

¹ The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

“Peace Committees” operating as national, regional and local forums on the difficult, practical work of building peace and cooperation among South Africa’s many communities and vested interests. Comprised of representatives from the various political groups, the police and defence forces, the Government, civic associations, labour organization and churches, these structures were both the framework and the bedrock for the transition.

At the same time unfortunately, there was much in place to counter these efforts. As a retort to the Peace Accord, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (another well-established black political organisation), along with the black administrations of the apartheid homelands of Ciskei and Boputhatswana, and white right wing groups such as the Conservative Party, had formed an alliance – the Concerned Group of South Africans -- dedicated to preserving the status quo. On the other end of the spectrum, the black nationalist Azanian Peoples Organisation and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), political organisations with active military wings, had also declined to sign the NPA. What all of these groups had in common was an antipathy to a future that they believed would leave them marginalised.

It was generally accepted that also operating in post-apartheid South Africa was a “third force” intent on destabilizing the country, existing either as a coordinated effort with support inside the Government, or, as some thought more likely, as disparate outfits of security forces, mercenaries, white nationalists, collaborators and criminals. Substantial evidence existed in support of the theory of a third force, including the results of an investigation finalised at the end of 1992 by the independent “Commission of Inquiry regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation” (more commonly known as the Goldstone Commission, after its chair), which found that while the Government was negotiating with the ANC, the intelligence unit of the South African Defence Force was still conducting covert operations against the group.

Violence was endemic to South Africa. South Africa’s own Human Rights Commission recorded in 1992 more than 3600 deaths attributable to politically motivated violence – about 10 deaths per day for every day of the year. Militant groups, black and white, were on the offensive and remained so through the early 1990s. Often most heinous were the violent power struggles among different elements of black society -- particularly the ANC and the IFP -- a direct outgrowth of the divide and rule tactics of apartheid, and influenced by the quest for power in the new South Africa. This phenomenon was greatly disturbing, both for the threat it presented to a successful transition to majority governance and for what it portended for the re-invented country.

Violence fed on violence. In an event that shook the nation, Chris Hani, the charismatic leader of the South African Communist Party, was assassinated in April 93. A couple of months before his killing, polls had ranked him the second most popular leader in South Africa after Mandela. He had deliberately chosen to live in a conservative white neighbourhood. He was gunned down in his driveway by a Polish immigrant, a hit man for a white right wing husband and wife team ultimately convicted of the conspiracy. The immediate aftermath of this event followed a typical cycle: the next day security forces fired on protestors at a police station in black Soweto, killing five; six days later, a white man

drove into the center of a town in the Vaal Triangle and shot dead two black men, and the following day, 18 April, four unidentified black gunmen fired at random on black township residents in Sebokeng, killing 21 -- adding another massacre to the litany.

Shortly after I arrived, I experienced first hand the unrest that was threatening to destabilise the country. Gunfire erupted during an ANC march in the East Rand planned to go from a black township to a small white city nearby. The route took the marchers past a hostel inhabited by members of the IFP and as the marchers passed, men from the hostel armed with guns, petrol bombs and traditional weapons came out to attack. Because it was a black township, the police sat on their hands instead of containing the aggressors or diverting the march. When things got out of control, we, the internationals, withdrew quickly. At the end of the day, 13 people were dead. The violence that erupted that day continued and escalated over several days in two neighbouring townships – ultimately, dozens were killed.

The rivalry, animosity and mistrust between the IFP and the ANC were fierce. In 1992, IFP cadres had perpetrated a massacre on ANC followers in Boipatong – an event that almost derailed the democratisation process. Monitoring the trial of the accused in that case was part of my job, with the objective of ensuring that the white justice apparatus gave these young men a fair trial. The twist however, was that the risk was either that they could be set free – a sham trial to ensure the collaborative role of a third force was not revealed, or that those defendants who might be inclined to testify should the proceedings advance would be silenced while in prison. The massacre had been perpetrated by upwards of 200 men and charges were brought against 74 of them, a significant number in a South Africa where prosecutions of political violence were exceedingly rare.

Overall, I found the violence pervading the country to be chilling. At times it felt that a culture of fear and ignorance was at least as widespread as a culture of tolerance and democracy. Casual possession of guns was so widespread that along with coat checks, nightclubs had gun check facilities. In our local peace committee in the Vaal, a small measure of trust was manifested when the participants were coaxed to deposit their guns in a locked filing cabinet for the duration of the meetings, retrieving them on their way out. In the East Rand, there was a period of several months when the internationals only went into certain areas wearing bullet proof vests – heavy attire when weighted down by the ceramic plates that were meant to ward off the bullets of AK47s. Some days I was tempted towards despondency, as we would get overwhelmed by reports of horrendous acts in the townships, committed by rival gangs or parties, such as the “necklacing” or dismemberment of a teenager, or random shootings of dozens of people in the ill-lit township nights, or on trains, or in taxi “wars.” In the St. James Church massacre of July 93, balaclava-clad gunmen opened fire on worshippers and threw hand grenades, killing 11 people. In August, a young white American humanitarian worker was pulled from her car and beaten to death by a mob of township youth in Gugulethu outside Cape Town.

As to the nascent political process, the situation was tenuous – on many levels. My team was called to monitor a rally in August 93 to be held by the Democratic Party (a predominantly white liberal party opposed to apartheid) in a highly impoverished black

settlement called Orange Farm. After the event I wrote the following account, which describes a scenario that vividly illustrated the complexities: “Naïve or ignorant, perhaps believing good intentions were preparation enough, the Democratic Party organised the rally without doing the necessary legwork in the community -- liaising with leaders, the Peace Committee, the police -- and boldly drove into the staging area, a barren square encircled by chain-link fencing. Angry, aggressive township youth were there, intent on stopping the rally, burning and otherwise destroying campaign paraphernalia and attacking the individuals. Denied an education, abused, for all practical purposes unemployable, these young men were enraged that after all the years of oppression, where most whites, even liberal ones, did nothing--at least nothing risky--a "white" party thought it could just stride into their area and "take" black votes. Things escalated to the point that the youths blocked the exit gate to trap the DP inside then stoned the DP cars as they frantically forced their way out.”

“In the meantime, the local peace committee members, black and white, as well as the international observers, were trying to restore calm. Eventually the police arrived, and things still being tense, it was arranged that the police would escort the remaining DP, as well as all monitors out of the area. As we were forming our convoy and it became clear that a police vehicle was going to be the last out, the attitude of the youth and other township residents shifted. They came at our cars, especially one identifiable as the Organisation for African Unity (in which I was riding), now demanding, pleading that we not leave before the police. Fear had replaced hostility in many of them, the deep fear and mistrust of the South African Police. From attacking us a few minutes before (in fact a UN car had been stoned while parked and the window smashed) the people were now desperate that we protect them.”

I recall thinking that night that it was hard to believe that ‘free and fair elections’ in a matter of months could be anything but a fantasy. In its twists and turns this event was emblematic of the dramatic swings in the political situation generally. One day there would be a violent clash between rival groups, and the next there would be a breakthrough at the Negotiating Forum, bringing the elections that much closer. This would in turn be followed by, for example, the Government conducting a countrywide round-up of leaders and activists of the PAC, one of the more radical black organisations, with accusations but without a shred of evidence against most of them, once again halting proceedings in the Forum. However, the negotiations would always re-start.

The white right wing, personified in the rejectionist militant Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), engaged in extreme acts of disruption, at one time physically attacking the Negotiating Forum meeting in South Africa’s World Trade Center. Although I was not there that day, I experienced the tactic in microcosm. I went to an anti-censorship film festival held at Wits University in Johannesburg at the end of July 1993. The AWB was there in small numbers (about 25) but in full regalia, that is, camouflage, face masks, pistols and huge swastika flags, to protest the screening of a film. The police came after I and another international observer called the top brass to report that the campus security had fled and the terrified festival organizers had locked the doors of the theatre, with hundreds of festival participants inside. Confrontation of any violent nature was ultimately avoided,

though the AWB did assault several members of the press. All this for the screening of a film on a university campus to a couple hundred mostly white people. It was deeply unnerving to imagine how they were going to react to an ANC government.

The moderate white leadership on the other hand, at its most influential in the National Party, held the center and in the end brought most of white South Africa with it. Paradoxically both the architect and formal dismantler of apartheid, the National Party, held its convention in early 94. I remember F. W. DeKlerk, still President of South Africa, sitting at a dais in front of a room of about 1500 people. In general, it was a crowd that felt like it could have been a gathering of the populace of, say, Fort Wayne, Indiana. The rhetoric, and response, the tone and structure were striking in that the event had the characteristics of a gathering of this nature in any established democracy. The content and context certainly set it apart however. The NP attempted, on a surprising number of fronts successfully, to reconstruct itself as the redeemer of South Africa from the horrors of the past, incidentally neglecting to recall that the NP was the author and enforcer of those horrors. It was impossible not to mark that there were black supporters of the party in the room.

Rallies and campaigning notwithstanding, political resistance to a multi-racial democratic South Africa was lingering in some surprising, or perhaps more accurately, dismaying quarters. IFP hostility to the new South Africa was continuing to generate sickening violence, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency in kwaZulu/Natal, the epicenter of IFP clashes with the ANC. The Johannesburg area also remained a locus for confrontation where, a month before the election, a march of thousands of Zulu royalists and IFP supporters erupted (was catapulted or provoked?) into a melee, resulting in 53 dead. Other bastions of resistance existed in several of the black “homelands” -- banana republics set up by the South African regime as independent “countries” seen as such only by South Africa, certain of the homeland leaders, and, believe it or not, the Israeli government. Mr. Mangope, head of the homeland of Boputhatswana was a fierce resister to the integration of the country. It was a significant political development when, in March of 94, a popular uprising culminated in the overthrow of the homeland administration. White right-wing militant support of Mangope contributed to the deaths of 60 people but Bop was now a participant in the process.

With all the contradictions, the transitional process continued at times to race, at times to stumble forward. The violence was one issue, but as the April 27 election was drawing nearer, procedural and technical issues were becoming more obvious. Seven weeks before the elections there was still much that had yet to fall into place. The vast majority of the eligible population was unregistered, and voter education had gotten off to an extremely slow start in most places. Voter education was essential, perhaps most importantly for purposes of convincing black voters that their vote would be secret. People understood the significance of education – due to the shortage of venues, in rural areas people might walk 20 kilometres to get to a voter education forum, or to get their ID cards for voter eligibility, another critical technicality. At an education forum I observed at a black technical college, many older people from the custodial staff took part: all in their uniforms, sitting toward the back of the room, certainly not confident of their right to be there. At the end of the day, a

mock election was held. To see the smiles on the faces of the people once they had cast only a mock ballot was an incomparable moment.

Barriers were toppling. With positive trends picking up momentum, sights unimaginable when I had arrived were being realised across the country. A huge rally of perhaps 100,000 people was held in March to commemorate the Sharpeville massacre of 34 years before. Jubilant throngs of black boys arrived at the site, hanging off of, hanging onto armoured personnel carriers of the South African police who were placidly, even happily transporting these ersatz hitchhikers. April, the month of the election, saw the South African Police partner with former arch-enemy Umkhonto we Sizwe (the armed wing of the ANC) to monitor a march in Alexandra.

Finally, the elections were two weeks away. The “campaigns” of the 18 parties that had qualified for the ballot had been interesting to say the least. “Third force” skeletons had been positively springing out of the Government closets, yet the National Party was as much of a legitimate candidate as the ANC; the radical PAC was mounting a fairly mainstream effort for political office while certain other black militants were still calling for ‘one settler, one bullet’; the Afrikaner “Freedom Front” was stumping for a white nationalist *volkstaat*, and the Democratic Party was appealing to peoples’ sensible liberal inclinations. At the time I wrote of the strangeness of it all -- the bizarreness of the normalcy.

Still however at this late date there were concerns that the election would have to be postponed. Was there enough time for people to register, would it be possible to set up all the voting stations, could the electorate get to them, would the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) marshal enough resources to count all the votes after the voting stations had closed? Many people remained unregistered and uneducated and sites had not yet been established for a third of the polling stations. Electoral officials had still to be appointed in many provinces, and once the voting stations were established, 20 million people had to be told where they were.

With six days to go, astonishingly, gratifyingly, the Inkatha Freedom Party at long last decided to come into the process. The IEC had therefore to modify 80 million ballots, already printed. The solution was to print 80 million stickers that would place the IFP as the last entry, making for a total of 19 parties to choose from.

Finally, it was April 26, the first day. I spent that and the following two days in a small team travelling throughout the Vaal triangle. It was still the old South Africa so the old categories applied to our destinations: we drove from Lenasia (an Indian township) to Vanderbiljpark (a conservative white stronghold) to Sebokeng and Evaton (massive black townships) to Rust ter Vaal (a coloured town) to Sharpeville and back to the Peace committee operations center in the main town of Vereeniging, tasked with keeping an overview of that region. The Vaal was fortunate in that the great majority of voting stations did not suffer the huge delays in delivery of voting materials that were reported in other parts of the country. Still, it was a process that languished, and, unfortunately, it was on that first day, the day designated for old and disabled people, that the setting up of voting stations took the longest. I wept that day, seeing these old, very old people patiently lined

up, a number of whom were only able to walk painfully, laboriously into the station and make their cross for the ANC. It was wonderful that they were voting and heartwrenching that they had not voted until now.

There were funny and touching encounters of course, like the man who got into the voting booth and wanted to cast his vote for God, or the woman who wanted to vote for Inkatha/Mandela. And I was witness to certain moments of pure joy, as when driving through an informal settlement in an area called Orange Farm we stopped to ask directions to the polling site. Two men in the group standing there grinned at us, said, "we'll take you there -we haven't voted yet!" and jumped into the back of the car, urging us on with great excitement. And another moment, dusk on Thursday, the last voting day, a woman jumping out of one of the township taxis, pulling her husband along behind her and dashing to the voting station, saying "vota, vota!", laughing and waving when she saw us. On the queue at a voting station in one of the Indian townships a big extended family, including children and infants, were patiently waiting together and engaging passersby in conversation, still enjoying themselves after six hours on line.

But the overwhelming mood of the people was serious, almost solemn, considered, reverential in a way. The queues were not raucous in the least, conversational tones were normal or hushed. As the day wore on people were tired of course, and hot, but only rarely was anyone ill-tempered. Even in the regions where voting materials never showed up that first day, anger only occasionally turned into an incident.

The counting of the ballots was another unique experience. The counting stations had 24 hour operations, two shifts of 12 hours each. It took hours on the opening shifts to train the people, and then once they got going the party agents (seven from each party allowed at each counting station) made sure to hold the process up at any opportunity, especially in locations where they thought their party wouldn't do well. Often you'd get a whole group of them arguing vehemently over one single ballot paper. Ah well, there was a lot at stake here.

After all the votes were counted, the ANC won with the support of close to 70% of the population. Despite all of the false steps, roadblocks, violence and political resistance, ultimately the majority of the black South Africans had been implacable, sharing a tacit understanding that the process launched was inexorable and like a river would simply swallow obstacles. There was also the immovability of the ANC and a tangible sense of certainty that the course was set. Finally conviction and an undercurrent of passion for a new country swept the process along.

Ten years later the questions still linger – was this an experience for a transitional society that could be duplicated? Or was it one that was so closely described by the particulars of the South African situation that it would stand as an anomaly, a success that would stand alone? Among other factors, South Africa was possessed of a vibrant civil society, an advanced infrastructure, an active press, a politically sophisticated liberation leadership, a unified majority and global support. These components do not come together very often. There has certainly been no transition quite like it in the years since, where the

prospects for success seemed so tenuous but the result met the highest hopes and, against the expectations of many, has sustained. It was, and is, a process and an event to remember.

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