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THE U.S. AND RACIAL REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

White South Africa now stands at a political crossroads, uncertain whether to take the first tentative steps down the westward path toward racial reform or to reinstitute classic apartheid while retreating into international isolation. The fierce debate over this issue is splitting South Africa's ruling National Party in a way unparalleled in the history of the Republic. The modest reform proposals supported by Prime Minister P.W. Botha of the National Party have unearthed a powerful anti-reform movement. The results of a recent by-election and the wavering of some of the Prime Minister's original supporters in parliament suggest that the opponents of racial reform may yet carry the day.

The outcome of the South African debate is of momentous importance for the United States. The Reagan Administration has abandoned the Carter confrontational approach to the Republic but still asserts that racial reform is the price for continuing and improving Pretoria's relations with Washington. More immediately, the weakening of the Botha government could threaten the outcome of the Namibian independence negotiations, upon which the Reagan Administration has staked much of its African policy prestige. It clearly serves U.S. interests, therefore, to demonstrate support for the South African reform program. By so doing, Washington also could assist the National Party during its current crisis.

Demonstrating support would not be difficult. The Administration, for example, could grant licenses for the sale of U.S. marine reconnaissance aircraft to the Republic or arrange a meeting between President Reagan and Prime Minister Botha.

Failure to act at this critical juncture will leave the U.S. open to charges of hypocrisy. Having pressed for change for so long, Washington cannot now seem to turn its back on the first glimmerings of racial reform in South Africa.

THE REFORM PROPOSALS

In May 1982, the President's Council, the Prime Minister's nominated advisory body on constitutional matters, unveiled its long-awaited report on constitutional reform. The Council recommended that South Africa reject the central constitutional precept of the apartheid system, which has dominated South African politics since 1948: that whites alone had the right to vote and to be directly represented in the central government. Beyond that, its proposals were relatively modest, reflecting the composition of the Council, which was made up of white, Colored, and Asian members, with no black representation. The Council proposed to enfranchise South Africa's 800,000 Asians and 3.5 million Coloreds (people of mixed race). Once this were done, the white, Asian, and Colored electorates each would be represented in separate houses of a new, tricameral parliament. Policy differences between the three houses would be settled by a Permanent Select Committee representing all three racial groups. In the event of a Select Committee deadlock, the dispute would be decided by the President's Council. South Africa's Asians and Coloreds would emerge as full citizens of their country, casting off the second-class status that the National Party had forced upon them after South African independence in 1948.

These reforms are scarcely comprehensive and fall far short of U.S. aspirations. They ignore South Africa's 18 million black majority. The parliament envisioned by the President's Council will not be racially integrated, and whites will continue to wield the bulk of political power. Also unreformed are controversial aspects of apartheid that still affect both the Asian and Colored communities, such as the Group Areas Act (restricting areas of residence according to race) and the Mixed Marriages Act (outlawing all interracial marriage).

It would be a mistake, however, to disregard the Council's proposals. The very fact that white South African society is openly discussing power sharing with any non-white group represents a giant step forward. The Prime Minister, moreover, has acknowledged openly that these projected reforms are only a first step toward broader and deeper changes in South Africa. Further reforms probably will be introduced before the Council's proposals are implemented. The representatives of the Colored and Asian communities dare not risk seeming to betray the interests of their own constituencies or of the moderate black leaders, such as Chief Buthelezi, who have been their traditional allies. Therefore, they will press for further concessions as the price for Colored and Asian entry into the new constitutional system. Since P.W. Botha has staked his prestige upon the acceptance of

the reform proposals, it seems likely that some of these concessions will be granted.

REACTION TO THE PROPOSALS

The fierce political reaction triggered by the proposals demonstrates conclusively that Mr. Botha has pushed his reform program to the current bounds of political feasibility in South Africa.

Arguments over constitutional reform already had split the National Party two months before the President's Council officially released its findings. Dr. Andries Treurnicht, an ultraconservative Cabinet minister and head of the most powerful of the National Party's four provincial organizations, based in the Transvaal, openly attacked the Prime Minister in February. Treurnicht asserted that Botha deliberately was undermining white supremacy in South Africa while pursuing a policy that aimed ultimately at racial integration. At least twenty National Party M.P.'s appeared ready to leave the party with Treurnicht, and it was believed that his support in the Transvaal provincial Congress was particularly strong.

Treurnicht, however, has never been a skilled party politician. On the other hand, the Prime Minister, who rose to prominence in the National Party's Cape organization, is a consummate manipulator of the party's political machine. At a March 1982 meeting of the Transvaal Congress of the National Party, Botha defeated Treurnicht by 172 votes to 36, expelling Treurnicht and seventeen of his most dedicated supporters from the National Party. They then formed an anti-reform opposition movement, the Conservative Party.

Despite P.W. Botha's show of strength at the Transvaal Congress, many National Party M.P.'s remained suspicious of his reform proposals. His triumph at the Congress should not be equated with broad popular support for his program. As a native of the Cape Province, Botha is distrusted in the Transvaal, the heart of National Party strength. He suffers further from having risen to the Prime Ministership in the wake of the "Muldergate" scandal, which removed from power both former Prime Minister John Vorster and his designated successor, Connie Mulder. Consequently, many white Afrikaaner and English voters believe that Botha's advancement was fortuitous and undeserved. They felt vindicated in this view when the new Prime Minister asserted harshly that white South Africans must learn to "reform or die."

The August by-election in Germiston, a suburb of Johannesburg, demonstrates that the Prime Minister's position is not strong. The National Party fell far short of an overall majority. The traditional far right-wing opposition Herstigste Nasionale Partei received 1,638 votes, the new Conservative Party 3,559, and the National Party 3,867. Had the head of the H.N.P., Jaap Marais,

and Treurnicht formed some sort of working alliance, as would seem possible in the future, the anti-reform movement would have won a commanding victory. And, had the official opposition, the liberal Progressive Federal Party, fielded a candidate, it most likely would have attracted sufficient votes away from the National Party to assure a Conservative victory. This possibility is particularly ominous since P.F.P. leader Van Zyl Slabbert refuses to support the reform proposals of the President's Council on the grounds that they do nothing for the nation's black majority. Should the P.F.P. maintain this stance and run candidates in future elections, it could woo enough voters away from the National Party to ensure the victories of anti-reform candidates.

Other aspects of the Germiston by-election are equally disturbing. Support for the two anti-reform parties cuts across both class and ethnic boundaries. White-collar workers and professionals were no less opposed to reform than the traditionally conservative blue-collar sector. English and Afrikaaner alike registered dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's program. Most surprisingly, in a nation of voracious news readers, the Conservatives and H.N.P. polled their joint majority without the endorsement of a single major newspaper. All of these factors seem to point to a deep-seated anti-reform sentiment in the Transvaal.

The Prime Minister's position thus appears considerably weaker after Germiston. National Party M.P.'s ill at ease with reform now will prove less reluctant to express their opposition. If future by-elections confirm a rising tide of Conservative support, some National Party members certainly will be tempted to defect to Treurnicht, if only to guarantee reelection in their constituencies. The next test comes in November at the by-elections at Parys, in the Orange Free State, Stellenbosch in Cape Province, and Walvis Bay in South-West Africa. National Party defeats there--or even narrow victories--could prompt serious defections from National Party ranks and weaken the reform movement.

CONCLUSION: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE U.S.

What role should the U.S. play in this unfolding drama? To be sure, racial reform in South Africa is fundamentally a domestic question, to be resolved by South Africans themselves. Overt foreign pressure for reform typically has had the effect of strengthening South Africa's anti-reform sentiments. On the other hand, the U.S. cannot ignore the situation. While pressure for further reform probably would prove counterproductive, Washington nonetheless could bolster the National Party image by recognizing that the Party is engaged in a reform process at some cost to itself. This would enhance Botha's prestige and defuse the Conservative argument that it does not pay to try to win U.S. approval as Washington will settle for nothing less than the immediate establishment of a one man, one vote unitary state.

How can such U.S. support be expressed? One very useful measure would be for the Reagan Administration to license the sale of marine reconnaissance aircraft to South Africa. The few aging South African Shackletons (converted World War II Wellington bombers) that still fly out of Simonstown naval base are far too old and unsophisticated to perform the key tasks of tracking shipping around the Cape of Good Hope and of performing air-sea rescue operations for distressed shipping. More important, the vintage Shackletons have become a focus of South African national consciousness, a symbol of the Republic's determination to carry out its security responsibilities despite its international isolation. Replacement of the Shackletons by Lockheed PC-3 Orions, or by the modified Boeing 737 currently being considered by the U.S. Coast Guard, would have considerable impact in South Africa, probably vastly exceeding the nature of the concession itself.

These U.S. aircraft, moreover, could play no role in helping Pretoria to maintain apartheid or to deal with black opposition, either at home or abroad. The Boeing 737 is clearly a civilian aircraft. The Orion, meanwhile, is a superior reconnaissance aircraft that is slow moving, with little maneuverability. It boasts extremely long-range and sophisticated radar and electronic equipment, but could not be used against South Africa's neighbors, since its low speed makes it vulnerable even to the most primitive fighter aircraft or ground to air missile. Moreover, since neither the Africa National Congress (the chief violent anti-government movement in South Africa), the South-West Africa People's Organization (the armed opposition to the South African presence in Namibia), nor any of South Africa's neighbors have much naval capacity, marine reconnaissance aircraft would not strengthen the white government's hand in dealing with its opponents.

A crisis point will be reached in South Africa, should Prime Minister Botha abandon his reform policy or South Africa's new Conservative Party win power. In either event, it then will be too late for Washington to influence the course of events in South Africa. The U.S. and South Africa will be on a collision course on racial questions and, in the event of Treurnicht's success, on the Republic's relations with its neighbors as well. To avoid this, the U.S. must demonstrate support for the reform process before such gestures become irrelevant. While the sale of marine reconnaissance aircraft or similar concessions may not guarantee the success of South African racial reform, it will enable Washington to assert that it fulfilled its moral obligation to assist the course of reform in South Africa. The U.S., at least, will have tried.

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