South Africa: A Reporter’s Notebook

by John de St. Jorre

I first came to South Africa 20 years ago to report a funeral. Passing quickly through Johannesburg, noting little else except the racial hierarchy outside of the old Lansdowne Hotel — white head porter, Indian deputy, and blacks carrying the bags — I drove to Pretoria.

The town was then small, dominated by its government buildings, its churches, and its Afrikaner heroes frozen in bronze. The streets were full of white faces. The funeral ceremonies took place on time, the volk mourned, and Dr. H. F. Verwoerd was laid to rest. My copy went off to The Observer in London, efficiently despatched by white telex operators. I zipped up my typewriter, packed my bag, and caught the next flight back to Lusaka, to Africa.

Reflecting on the experience in Zambia, I couldn’t quite work out where I had been. I had spent four years in West, Central, and East Africa and I had undoubtedly just added another point to my continental compass. But what I had seen didn’t look, smell, or sound like Africa.

It wasn’t quite European either: there had been many black and brown faces in the background and the sun was different. The Afrikaners, though white, were different too. South Africa, as a name, was no great help. Perhaps a new name was needed, something like “Afrikania.”

It was not until a decade later that I returned for much longer and wrote a small book about the country. Since then I have been back and forth, culminating in a six-week trip earlier this year.

What, in the refracted gaze of the outsider, is new over the last decade, and what isn’t?

The most profound change by far is the mood of the blacks. There is a feeling of buoyancy, expectancy, and confidence that I believe is quite new. It is, moreover, based on achievement rather than on fantasy. For 21 continuous, bloody, costly months, South Africa’s blacks have sustained a physical protest against the government and brought the centuries-old struggle for power to a new threshold.

This has happened notwithstanding the enormous disparity between State and black power, the regional differences, and the severe intra-black divisions. That this herculean effort has caused barely a ripple on the placid surface of white society is not as important as it might seem. Black power, “people’s power,” is at this stage essentially black therapy.

“Last year was the watershed,” said Professor Chabani Manganyi, one of South Africa’s few black clinical psychologists. “There was a dramatic broadening of resistance, and blacks finally broke the psychological barrier of thinking that the whites were all-powerful and could not be challenged. In 1976, it was a children’s war. Now everyone is involved.”

What matters for blacks is that the old fears, docility, and inferiority complex have largely been exorcised. There is also the gut feeling that, after countless defeats and false dawns, and the knowledge that there is still a long road to travel, the end is in sight.

“We are not poised for the immediate transfer of power,” said Zwelakhe Sisulu in the keynote speech at the National Education Crisis Committee’s meeting in Durban in March 1986, in what is probably the best black analysis of the crisis to date. “We are, however, poised to enter a phase which can lead to transfer of power.”

How do they know that? How do we know that they know? Knowledge in these cases is not a precise science. There are no elections, no reliable polls, no...
visible weakening of white power or will, no negotiations, no talks about talks to tell you what is blowing in the wind. But if you have been to South Africa before and go there now, you will know.

During my recent trip I sampled a township funeral (Alexandra), a Methodist prayer meeting in the heart of Johannesburg, a United Democratic Front rally in Cape Town, a shanty town fighting a removal in the Eastern Cape, and a liberation theologian's Easter church service in Soweto.

These gatherings have many things in common. First, there is a surprising cross-section of individuals, organizations, classes, and races engaged in what is simply known as “the struggle.” Second, everything is intensely political; and while the immediate issues are probably local, the national agenda of ending apartheid and moving to black rule is never forgotten.

Third, there is an emotional undercurrent which carries with it a grittiness and pride I had not experienced before. This is evident in everyday demeanor. At Jan Smuts airport, I asked a black cleaning lady the way to the bank. “First we greet,” she said firmly. Chastened, I made amends. “Good morning,” she replied. “Now, the bank is on the next floor.”

Finally, a sense of already living in another country — a new, predominantly black South Africa — is inescapable. Every meeting ends with that most moving of songs, billed simply as the “national anthem” that has nothing to do with Die Stem. Nkosi Sikelele i’Afrika, everyone sings, “God Bless Africa.”

Unity of spirit does not conceal disunity of method. Black divisions are manifest in the banners that advertise the UDF, the ANC, AZAPO, the South African Communist Party (the Soviet Communist Party, at the Alexandra funeral last February), the different trade union federations, and a host of local groups.

At the end of the celebrations marking the fifth anniversary of the Ulundi Choral Society, watched by a benign Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and the KwaZulu/Inkatha establishment, everyone also sang Nkosi Sikelele i’Afrika (without the clenched fists), yet the gulf between Inkatha and the other black nationalist groups is wide and widening.

It is true, also, that there is no national black leadership in South Africa today. There is a lack of cohesion in black politics that is both a source of strength and weakness. The tendrils of black resistance have been forced by government repression to grow downwards instead of upwards, strengthening black power at the local level but diffusing it nationally.

Yet the standing of the ANC has been dramatically enhanced over the last 18 months despite it being officially banned and regarded by the government as the devil incarnate. Its status is reinforced for the visitor in many, often curious, ways.

These include the ANC flags and colors at every black meeting; the steady flow of people to Lusaka — South Africa’s equivalent of the Road to Damascus; the constant public debate about the wisdom or folly of the government dealing with the organization; the telephonic chitchat that goes on between the ANC and the journalists and others (“just pick up the phone and call Thabo Mbeki if you want to go to see him,” advised a journalist friend when I was leaving for Lusaka); even Inkatha sports ANC colors and Chief Buthelezi makes a careful distinction between his condemnation of the “External Mission of the ANC” and his amicable relationship with Nelson Mandela.

Mandela himself, the ANC’s imprisoned leader, remains as potent as Banquo’s ghost. No leader has emerged to usurp his place, and no settlement of black and white differences, or intra-black rivalries, is likely in his absence. If the struggle goes on for a long time, as it probably will, new black leaders will almost certainly emerge within the country, rather than from the older group of political prisoners and exiles.

But what is more striking than black divisions is the similarity of blacks’ political goals. Look across the spectrum from homeland leaders like Chief Buthelezi and Enos Mabuza of KaNgwane, who recently had a red carpet reception by the ANC in Lusaka, to the UDF, the unions, to AZAPO and the black consciousness groups. All agree that the entire apartheid structure, including the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and segregated education, must go.

All demand, as essential conditions for a dialogue with the government, the release of Mandela and the political prisoners, the unbanning of the ANC and PAC, and freedom to organize and engage in open political activity. Only then can discussions begin on what they all describe as a nonracial, democratic, united South Africa — in short, a totally new political and constitutional order.

Black organizations tend to be vague about their vision of the future economic structure of the country, but there is a strong underlying assumption that there will be a major redistribution of wealth, with or without socialism.

Against this, the government’s plans — and the white electorate’s tolerance — for change appear totally inadequate. And here the two South Africas look as hermetically sealed, and as out of step, as they have been for much of their history.

There have, of course, been considerable changes during the last decade or so. But there are several important tests that have to be made to discover the true quality of “change” or “reform.” First, the point of view. A glance through the black prism will produce a very different result from that seen from the white perspective.

From the black point of view, there have been four major changes — a steady increase in wages and skills, legalized trades unions, a recognition of permanence in so-called white areas, and the recent repeal of the pass laws. The rest — desegregating first-class hotels, parks, some beaches, repealing the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts and so on — is cosmetic.

Then there is the agent of change. Blacks’ new position in the economy came largely as the result of economic growth and a shortage of skilled (white) labor. The recognition of black trades unions and leasehold rights was pressed on a reluctant government.
by the business community and a few enlightened individuals. The government deserves credit for finally getting to grips with the pass laws but blacks tend to see this as a response to over a year and a half of protest, violence, and pressure.

Finally, there is the matter of timing. At best, the government is seen as a reluctant reformer, reacting to events rather than initiating change because apartheid is inherently wrong. I remember Robert Sobukwe, the PAC leader rusticated in Kimberley, telling me in the wake of the Soweto upheaval in 1976 that if the government made three key social and economic reforms—education, pass laws, and housing—he risked losing massive support because these were the issues that most concerned blacks in those days. By implication, the ANC was likely to suffer the same fate.

At worst, the government is seen as a good gardener. "Pretoria is a pruner," said Fikele Bam, the black lawyer. "It prunes the apartheid tree to increase its strength."

The government reforms by stealth; often there is a step forward followed by a nervous step back. Reforms are announced but implemented after long delays, like the desegregation of the central business districts, or the granting of freehold rights to blacks in the townships, or the restoration of citizenship which still leaves several millions—those who are deemed to belong to the nominally independent homelands—in limbo.

There has been a mighty change in the government's rhetoric as a result of the National Party sloughing off its right wing, its ideology, and a good chunk of its past. In its place has come a left-wing philosophy, is now party gospel. Phrases like "apartheid is dead," "universal suffrage in a unified South Africa," "power sharing," "outlawing hurtful discrimination" (is there another kind?), and "equal opportunities for all racial groups" strike the time traveler forcibly. A major reeducation program of the white community is under way.

To the government's credit, it has convinced itself and the majority of whites that a less rigid racially defined society is both acceptable and necessary. The result is evident in sport, in the lowering of racial barriers as blacks advance into the economy, in some levels of social contact, and in general attitudes. Whites are neither as arrogant nor blacks as servile as they used to be.

An Afrikaner civil servant explained it in generational terms. "My father, a retired inspector of black schools, has left the National Party to join the Conservatives," he said. "I am a loyal Nat and think P.W. Botha is doing the right thing in working toward a multiracial government through the tricameral Parliament, the Regional Services Councils, and so on. I admit though I still have the old hang-ups about blacks. But my son is quite different. He doesn't want to live with them but he treats them like anyone else, like human beings."

Nevertheless, South Africa remains two distinct racial cultures. Apartheid has done its work well and the results cannot be rapidly undone, particularly because the government is adept at shielding its constituency from the costs and unpleasantness inherent in real change.

"The government has been successful in persuading the bulk of whites that change is necessary and the Nationalists are the only people that can do it," said Professor Robert Schrire of Cape Town University. "It has also convinced whites that change will not affect their status, security, or living standards."

To an outsider, the country's whites appear to continue to live in their velvet-cushioned dream world. The sun shines, the maid comes to work, the cricket season gives way to the rugby season, foreign travel is a bit more difficult due to those treacherous foreign bankers who have sunk the rand; but it'll be a Mercedes or a BMW next year and the Natal beaches are always fun.

And then there's the South African Broadcasting Service. I love, in a masochistic way, listening to the English service of the radio where white South Africa's trivial pursuits are on daily public display. During my last visit I heard a heated debate on whether white children should wear school uniforms or not, the relative merits of zips over buttons on men's trousers, parlor games based on BBC models but embarrassingly bad, the plummy, more-British-than-the-British tones of the announcers retailing the endless weather forecasts and stock market reports, the oily smugness of the Radio Today Commentary, and the curious news values. Once, I sat up in bed with a jolt when a news item began "...a report into the recent unrest and violence has blamed the police..." but it turned out to be about a riot in Birmingham.

Lionel Abrahams, the writer, put it well in a recent issue of Leadership. While cherishing the English cultural component of South Africa's heritage, he wrote: "I have little patience for the trivia and trash of English popular culture, and especially so when these are displacing indigenous matter to sustain the cozily, evasive, half-mad myth that we are somewhere else."

That's it: many white South Africans seem to think they are in another country where their gilded lives are not overshadowed by the awesome knowledge that they share the land with black people, who outnumber them five to one, and who desperately want a slice of what they take for granted—nice housing, good schools, clean, orderly, safe towns, and a vote to make sure the government stays in line and keeps things that way.

Other things that haven't changed: the charm and basic honesty (when you push them) of the Afrikaners; the friendliness of the blacks; the intense religiousness of all South Africans—surely one of the most churchgoing people on earth; the enduring illusions of whites that they "know" their (giveaway word) blacks; the newspaper editorials urging "change before it is too late" (they were writing that 10 years ago); the blank masks people wear as they pass others of a different race in the street; the sheer old-fashioned feel of South Africa (World War II nostalgia, and cigarette advertisements on the radio like the one for Peter Stuyvesant—still, hard to believe—the "passport to smoking pleasure"); the endless political talk, and white guilt, skin-deep but
not about to be purged by giving up a good thing — at least, not yet.

So what, as American businessmen are fond of asking, is the bottom line?

There is a sense of expectancy in the air that was not apparent to me in 1966 or even in 1976. There is a long haul ahead but the country’s “brawling constituencies,” in journalist Ken Owen’s phrase, seem to be strengthening their defenses and getting ready for the fray.

I do not have the impression that a negotiating — or even a pre-negotiating — climate exists. For the blacks, the balance of power isn’t right; they would be negotiating at a severe disadvantage. For the whites, notably the Afrikaners, the costs are too low. Why concede anything of substance when you are not hurting and when, moreover, the alternative — black rule — is so frightening?

Yet the blacks, despite their relative powerlessness and isolation, have seized the initiative. Their agenda is very different from the government’s. They are not talking about economic and social reform or cautious, government-controlled schemes to “share power” in complicated consociational structures dreamt up by Chris Heunis and his not untalented coterie of constitutional engineers.

“We are not fighting and dying in order to have a better system of waste disposal,” Oliver Tambo commented recently on the new Regional Services Councils.

“The issue is not reform any longer,” said Professor Deon Geldenhuys, “it is the struggle for power.”

Some whites know this and have accepted it. They have truly crossed the only Rubicon that matters in South Africa and are now actively involved on the side of the blacks.

“Young people are aware that a change of consciousness, of the white sense of self, has to be achieved along with a change of regime, if, when blacks do sit down to consult with whites, there is anything to talk about,” Nadine Gordimer wrote recently.

For whites — young, middle-aged, or old — who have crossed that threshold, the surge of black power is a unique, exciting experience.

“I wouldn’t live anywhere else,” said a member of the Black Sash. “When you go to a funeral or any event in the townships, you see black, brown, and white sharing the most exhilarating comradeship. Then I go back to my white suburb and feel like crying because I have left part of myself behind where the true South Africa is. It’s inspiring and heartbreaking. But I wouldn’t miss it for anything. You feel you are living history every day.”

For anyone, South African or foreigner, who hasn’t shared that feeling, the journey, in the words of the Guide Michelin, is worth the detour.

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