

## South Africa: What Kind of Transition?

A number of conditions came together in the late 1980s to force South Africa's white leaders to drop their hardline resistance to change and embark on a more complicated strategy of cautious reform linked with a more covert style of repression. The defeat of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in 1988 at the hands of Cuban and Angolan forces was a crushing blow to white South Africa's sense of invulnerability. On the economic front, years of international sanctions had stalled the South African economy and depressed living standards. Continued defiance by opposition groups in South Africa--despite years of repression--made it clear to some white leaders that the "total strategy" of trying to smash regional and local opposition was not working.

Well before President F.W. de Klerk's February 1990 announcement that Pretoria would release Nelson Mandela and unbanned groups such as the African National Congress (ANC), splits had developed in the white community. Many of the ruling National Party's more powerful constituents, especially business leaders, had been communicating with the ANC and were convinced that a negotiated transition to political democracy held the best hope for saving capitalism in South Africa.

National Party strategists have long understood that the democratic movement's strongest weapon was the ability to mobilize large numbers of people. A sure way to counter the opposition's commitment to participatory democracy was to brutally repress that public participation. But repression carried out by white men in uniforms carried a price for the government behind those uniforms. The international sanctions of the mid-1980s were a response to the way South African police and military forces repressed the township uprisings dating from mid-1984 through 1988. Government strategists learned that a more covert form of repression was needed.

There is abundant evidence, including secret government documents and testimony from South African police and military officials, revealing a conscious government strategy to destabilize the democratic movement through assassinations, sabotage, and support for vigilantes spreading random violence.

### Bush Administration Policy

The Bush administration lost no time in stating its opposition to economic sanctions against Pretoria, reiterating the specious argument that U.S. corporations in South Africa could be a positive force for change even though they employed less than one percent black workers. When Bush officially dropped U.S. federal sanctions in June 1991 it came as no surprise. Anti-apartheid forces pointed out that the pre-conditions for dropping sanctions which were written into the original law had not been met by the de Klerk government. But liberals in Congress could not muster enough support to challenge the President's action, and the anti-apartheid movement has been in such disarray that little pressure was mounted to protest Bush's action.

The dropping of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act still left in place some federal restrictions and dozens of state, city and institutional sanctions and divestment laws around the USA accounting for billions of dollars worth of blocked investment and trade. Most local activists vowed to keep their sanctions in place. As recently as November 1991, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen threatened that although the Bush administration would not directly challenge these local sanctions, it reserved the right to support other parties who did.

The violence by government security forces and freelance vigilantes now threatens to derail the process of negotiation toward a democratic South Africa. Yet many people in the West have been convinced that apartheid is being laid to rest and the violence ripping South Africa is ethnically based "black-on-black" violence. Those of us who understand that apartheid will not die of its own weight need to educate and mobilize other Americans to pressure federal, state and local institutions here to maintain pressure on the South African government until there are free and fair elections are held.

Even if there is a successful transition to a representative government in South Africa, the need for international solidarity will remain great. Without international support it will be very difficult for Nelson Mandela--or any other leader--to deal with the contradiction of (1) needing to redistribute wealth downward in the class structure, but (2) knowing that the seizure of property from the wealthy will bring punitive action from the international allies of the wealthy (especially those in London and Washington).

#### What Can ACAS Do?

- ACAS should take a firm stand against lessening U.S. pressure on the South African government until either (1) a democratic election is held and is judged to be free and fair by the international community, or (2) mass democratic forces such as the ANC, COSATU, and the South African Council of Churches say sanctions should be dropped. ACAS members should support local efforts to maintain state and local divestment ordinances. This should be coupled with educational campaigns to explain to Americans that apartheid is not dead and that much of the violence in South Africa is *not* "black-on-black" "tribal" violence.
- ACAS should support efforts to build direct links between community organizations in South Africa and here. By strengthening these ties at the popular level, we can help Americans develop a more realistic understanding of what the South African people are going through. These grassroots ties will help prepare for the likely drop-off in activism here when South Africa becomes democratic. These direct links will also facilitate educating Americans about progressive economic policies (e.g., land reform) that may be implemented by a future democratic government.
- ACAS should encourage students and faculty to visit South Africa on politically oriented tours to learn first-hand what is going on in the mass democratic movement.