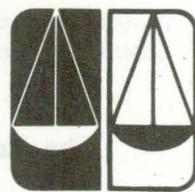


The October Elections in South Africa



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Background Paper

South Africa's upcoming municipal elections, on October 26th, have been touted by government officials to be the most important in the country's history, even more so than last year's general (whites only) election. The government boasts that for the first time in recent South African history, people of all racial groups will vote in a nation-wide election.

The electorate will choose members of local municipal governing bodies, often referred to as town councils. While it is true that people of all racial groups will vote, in true apartheid style, whites will vote only for white town councilors and blacks will vote only for councilors in the black townships.

The relatively modest status of the town councilors being elected, however, stands in sharp contrast to the much larger issues being put to the test in the upcoming election. The government has most at stake in the deeply troubled black townships where previous attempts to install local governing bodies brought the nation to the brink of revolution in late 1984 and 1985. Those local authorities were violently rejected by black township residents, with the result that the vast majority of them eventually collapsed. The government was forced to battle residents for control of the townships using maximum force and widespread detentions authorized under the State

of Emergency. With most opposition leaders now in jail and their organizations effectively banned, a relatively high voter turnout in the black townships would signal a defeat for the anti-apartheid groups and the re-establishment of the government's authority.

A high voter turnout for these municipal elections is also critical to the success of the government's proposed national negotiating forum; the centerpiece of its current vision of reform. The government hopes to build compliant black political institutions from the ground up, making the municipal level of government the primary building block of future black political structures at the regional and national levels. The semblance of democracy at the local level would create legitimacy for future higher-level institutions.

Finally, the municipal elections in the white areas will test the mandate of the Nationalist Party with regard to its proposed constitutional reforms and the Angolan/Namibian settlement talks. Weighing in the balance will also be control of the Regional Service Councils (RSCs). Among other functions, the RSCs control the flow of resources to the black township councils. The government hopes to provide enough financing to those councils to ensure their stability. The Conservative Party (the official

white opposition party in Parliament) has vowed to cut that flow of resources if they gain control of the RSCs. That would render a death blow to Botha's planned cooptation of the black township councils.

The Franchise - Who Will Vote

Black South Africans are designated to elect approximately 2,000 councilors to roughly 253 municipal bodies. But not every black South African will be eligible to vote. Millions of Blacks will be excluded.

Most of the exclusions are the consequence of the government's attempts to re-draw the map of South Africa along ethnic lines. Some 15 million Blacks considered to be residents of homelands will not vote, even though they constitute some of the largest urban townships in South Africa. Additionally, Africans living in 22 towns and settlements on Tribal Trust lands (areas earmarked for incorporation into homelands) will be denied a vote. Also excluded will be millions of black people designated as "squatters" because they live illegally in shantytowns around urban peripheries and thousands of black people who live in "white" residential areas, including black maids living in the backyards of their employers.

Securing black participation in the elections is so important, the South African government is expected to spend approximately R4.7 million (roughly U.S. \$2.4 million) on a public relations campaign to encourage black voting. The government has also proposed extending the voting over a three-day period and the widespread use of mail-in ballots to minimize possible intimidation at the polls. The government has made it a criminal offense to call for a boycott of the elections and has jailed opposition leaders known to oppose the elections.

Nevertheless, the boycott movement is gaining momentum. Before being severely restricted in February, 1988, the United Democratic Front, representing nearly 700 national and community

organizations of all races called for a boycott, stating that the elections "will not serve any meaningful role in bringing about justice, democracy and peace for the oppressed majority." The South African Council of Churches openly defied the prohibition against calling for a boycott by denouncing the elections as "a farce and a fraud" at its July, 1988 annual meeting. And on September 4th, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, from the pulpit of the Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town, called upon the country's 1.8 million Anglicans to boycott the segregated nation-wide elections. "I am aware of the penalties attaching to the call," Archbishop Tutu said. "I am not defying the government. I am obeying God." Calling for a boycott of the elections is an offense punishable by 10 years imprisonment or a fine of up to R20,000 (roughly U.S. \$10,000).

In the last municipal elections, a popularly-supported boycott resulted in a black voter turn-out of only 6% in Soweto and about 15% in other parts of the central industrial complex known as the Vaal Triangle.

Black Local Authorities - The Bloody Past

The Black Local Authorities Act (No. 102 of 1982) gave a broad range of responsibilities for the management of local affairs to newly-created city councils, township councils and town committees--all labeled "local authorities." In theory, the black townships were treated as self-sufficient units, capable of financing their own functions. In reality, they lacked a tax base or basic infrastructure from which to raise funds to meet even the most basic demands for services.

From the outset, the "local authorities" were viewed by township residents as apartheid structures; imposed by the government in an attempt to strengthen separate development and lacking the power to change conditions in the townships. Township councilors have been condemned as government col-

laborators. Some have used their positions to engage in corrupt practices. Most have used their positions to better their own life-styles.

Many local authorities tried to generate revenue by raising rents, despite an economic depression and rising unemployment. The rent hikes sparked open rebellion in township streets. Rent boycotts in at least 54 townships drained municipalities of as much as \$500 million. In some of the most violent protests, the councilors became live targets of anger from fellow township residents. Several were killed. Homes and businesses of councilors were petrol-bombed. Under pressure from campaigns against them, many councilors resigned. By mid-1985, only a few of the black local authorities established pursuant to the 1982 Act were still functioning.

Out of sheer desperation, township residents moved to take control of their own communities. "Civic associations", "action committees", and "street committees" became vehicles for community control of the townships. "Civics" played multiple roles. They organized rent and consumer boycotts, street committees and people's courts. When necessary, they even arranged for garbage collection.

The State's response was to deploy vast numbers of police and troops in the townships in an attempt to shore up the black local authorities. A State of Emergency was declared under the authority of which more than 40,000 people were detained without charge. The activities of the civic associations were labeled treasonous and township leaders were tried for treason and subversion of state authority.

The October municipal elections will test whether the State's heavy-handed actions have battered black voters into submission.

The New Apartheid Vision - The Great Indaba

Over the past several months, the South African government submitted to Parliament its latest set of political

reforms designed to placate African political aspirations while guarding white domination. The scheme is built on the framework established by the Republic of South Africa Constitution Act (No. 110 of 1983) which created three parallel, but separate, houses of Parliament for the white, Indian and "coloured" racial groups. The key concept is that all governmental responsibilities can be divided into two categories: "own affairs" and "general affairs". The white, "coloured" and Indian houses of Parliament legislate separately with respect to "own affairs", issues that bear solely on their respective racial communities. South Africa's residential segregation, mandated by The Group Areas Act, makes local government fall neatly into the category of "own affairs". All three houses of Parliament must agree on legislation affecting "general affairs", for example, defense, foreign affairs, finance, justice or internal state security. Conflicts between the houses on matters of general affairs are resolved by the binding decision of the President's Council, which is controlled by President Botha.

The current constitutional scheme excludes Africans from participation in Parliament. When the new constitution was enacted in 1983, African political participation was to be restricted to the homeland governments and township councils. The reaction to that exclusion erupted into the violence that shook South Africa in late 1984 and which has only recently quelled.

President Botha's current proposals seek to make the reforms more attractive to black voters through the creation of new political structures to incorporate Africans at higher levels of government. In July 1988, the government unveiled proposals for the creation of regional councils to represent black people living outside the "homelands." The regional councils appear to be an alternative to establishing a fourth house of Parliament for Africans and would give Africans a middle-tier role in

government for the first time. Their authority, however, would be limited to "own affairs", that is, they would have no authority outside of the townships. More importantly, they are to serve as a basis for participation (by appointment) in what President Botha has described as "a formal forum for deliberation": the National Council.

The National Council, soon to be dubbed the Great Indaba, is the centerpiece of Botha's reform scheme. The National Council is to serve as a multiracial constitutional convention that would devise a power-sharing formula that would extend to the African community limited political participation at the national level. In the interim, it may also consider existing and proposed legislation of "national interest."

Initially, the forum is to have a black majority -- 30 of 46 members. The minimum black representation would include the chief minister and a legislator from each of the six nominally self-governing, but not yet independent, homelands. Eighteen members will be chosen from the nine regional councils. At least four members will be drawn from the Indian and Coloured houses of Parliament. President Botha, however, is authorized at his discretion to enlarge the membership by nomination to a total of 59 and to participate himself as the state president. That would allow him to effectively control any vote.

The National Council, as proposed, however, will not be a voting body. It will function solely in an advisory capacity to discuss proposed constitutional reforms and to make recommendations to the white dominated government. Its recommendations will be by consensus, not majority vote.

In addition to the regional councils and the National Council, President Botha has announced the possibility that he will appoint Africans to the Electoral College, which elects the President, to the President's Council and to the Cabinet.

At each level of Botha's reforms, however, there is an appearance of power-sharing which lacks substance.

The elements are consistent: 1) a fragmentation of the population into separate groups primarily along ethnic lines; 2) a preservation of the principle that the political rights of Africans who live in the bantustans must differ from the rights of those who do not; and 3) the limitation of black power to "own affairs" preserving for white decision-making those issues most critical to the national body politic as a whole.

In the words of Minister of Information Stoffel van der Merwe, the government hopes that its package of reforms will build "a critical mass of moderate support" to counterbalance the demands of more radical black leaders. The prospects for wide African participation in the National Council, however, appear to be bleak. To date, even Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and other key black moderates have rejected the proposed council and refuse to participate unless Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners are released, the African National Congress is unbanned and the State of Emergency is lifted.