

Published in Leadership

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AFTER 40 YEARS IN THE DESERT OF APARTHEID

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The desert of apartheid

After 40 years of wandering in the desert of apartheid, Afrikanerdom and the National Party are today further removed from their supposed White Promised Land than 40 years ago.

Instead of being on the banks of the river Jordan, ready to enter the land of Canaan, Afrikanerdom (and the rest of the South African population) are trapped in the middle of the desert of apartheid.

For quite a long time the protagonists of Afrikaner nationalism pampered the idea that the Afrikaner volk was a select - if not a chosen - people with a God-given destiny. During the first half of this century the Afrikaners experienced relative economic deprivation and a lack of effective political nationalism. This situation contributed to the parallels between the exile in Egypt and the humiliation of the Afrikaners.

During the first half of the century, the Afrikaners were susceptible to the idea that they were also a select people with a manifest destiny to restore their national (volk) sovereignty and their national freedom and self-determination. These ideas easily gave rise to the ideology that it would be proper for the Afrikaner nation to use political and other measures (not necessarily parliamentary) to eradicate the real and imagined injustices inflicted upon them. This set the scene for a new symbolic Great Trek from the Egypt-like "captivity" in a country dominated by the English establishment towards a White Promised Land governed and controlled by the Afrikaner volk.

But apart from the struggle against English-speakers for political and economic hegemony, Afrikaner tribalism and nationalism were even more strongly promoted by the fear that they could be over-run by Blacks. During the 1920s and the 1930s poor-White Afrikaners and Blacks competed for scarce jobs in the cities. This played a decisive role in transforming Afrikaner tribalism and nationalism into a forceful political party with a dynamic ideology and a religious justification for what it was about to do en route from "Egypt" to the "promised land".

The changing face of apartheid

Almost immediately after the NP took office in 1948, it started to implement a three-prong programme. Additional discriminatory laws were passed against Coloureds and Indians; the bureaucracy was systematically enlarged and additional para-statal were developed to create lucrative opportunities mainly for Afrikaners; and a variety of welfare (or redistributive) programmes were launched to uplift the mainly Afrikaans poor-Whites.

During the greater part of the fifties these measures were easily justified as temporary measures to solve the (undeserved) poverty of the Afrikaners. When this moral justification became very questionable at the end of the fifties, Dr Verwoerd removed almost all moral discomfort by offering an ideological justification in terms of Grand Apartheid, i.e. the idea of separate freedoms and national self-determination for every ethnic group.

During the term of Mr Vorster, a variety of pragmatic reasons were offered to explain why the Verwoerdian dream of a (pure) White promised land was not attainable and why Blacks should be accepted as permanent residents in "White" South Africa. But in

spite of pragmatic efforts to give apartheid a more humane face, the Verwoerdian ideology was still propagated unashamedly as the moral justification for apartheid although it was acknowledged that grand apartheid was no longer attainable. This was the beginning of the moral hypocrisy that in due time became completely institutionalised.

The Botha government abolished many democratic institutions in the name of reform and replaced them with a multitude of new structures (mainly for co-optation) while power became more concentrated and consolidated in the State President's office. These changes bureaucratized apartheid and created bureaucratic wealth for some Whites and some Blacks. At the same time Botha's reform securocratized apartheid and created almost indisputable securocratic power.

As the wandering in the desert of apartheid dragged on during the 40 years, Malan's parliamentarianism (to enact discrimination and redistribution) was supplemented by Verwoerd's ethnic ideology (to supply a moral justification). This was supplemented by Vorster's pragmatism (to keep the clumsy system going). During the last decade Botha's bureaucratic and securocratic structures have been superimposed on all the previous forms of apartheid to keep (and force) the crumbling system into an upright position.

After 40 years of apartheid, the NP - and with it the rest of South Africa - is bogged down in apartheid. The apparent changes since the simple apartheid of Malan and Strijdom, the grand apartheid of Verwoerd, into the pragmatic apartheid of Vorster and into the bureaucratic and especially securocratic apartheid of Botha, have altered little in the basic underlying structure of apartheid, i.e. the structure of White privileges and power vs. Black deprivation and powerlessness.

To an objective observer of the South African scene after 40 years of NP government, the following ought to be obvious:

- * A White promised land is not, and never was, attainable, although the supporters of the extreme Right are still being misled by their false prophets towards all kinds of mirages.
- * The transition towards a non-racial South Africa is impossible as long as the NP remains in power. The NP will probably remain in office for a considerable time despite its paralysis and its inability either to identify the full dimensions of the mounting crisis or to do something truly effective about it.
- * Consequently, South Africa is doomed to remain an apartheid society for the foreseeable future. It will become more isolated, more divided, more autocratic, much poorer with unhappy and still separated societies

What went wrong?

The worshipping of golden calves in White oases

The NP government failed to reach the imagined promised land of the Afrikaner tribe. Yet it used its parliamentary power to create and expand lucrative (and mainly White) oases in the desert of apartheid.

As Whites are the main beneficiaries of these oases, the question arises who created them. To what extent are they the result of the initiative, entrepreneurship, ingenuity, frugality and the "sweat equity" of the Whites alone? To what extent did Blacks contribute to their making.

If we consider the comprehensive discriminatory measures, the inequality of opportunities and the restrictions placed on the freedom and movement of Blacks, it seems reasonable to say that a large part of these (almost exclusive) White oases are not the

making of the Whites, but the result of apartheid. In spite of recent increases in government spending on Blacks, the Whites still have a very long way to go before their apartheid account will be settled.

For the Afrikaners the rendezvous in these oases have been very advantageous. While their per capita-income was less than half that of their English-speaking compatriots in 1948, it has risen to 75 per cent of the (now much higher) income of the English-speakers.

For the Israelites their wandering in the desert were a long and painful experience to purify them and to make them worthy to enter their Promised Land. Their occasional relapse in the worshipping of golden calves cost them dearly and prolonged their desert journey.

The 40-year-long stay in their oases has not only enriched the Whites but it has also spoiled them and inculcated strong materialistic and bourgeois attitudes in their value system. Many Whites became typical worshippers of golden calves. Originally these calves were mainly fattened in the (English orientated) capitalistic stables of the private sector. Lately many of them can be found in a multitude of (Afrikaner controlled) bureaucratic stables!

In retrospect it is quite fortunate that there never has been a White promised land. As a spoiled people and as recent worshippers of golden calves, the Afrikaners are today far less worthy of entering such a land than they were 40 years ago.

For the same reasons, tragically enough, neither the Afrikaners nor their English-speaking compatriots are today spiritually prepared to make those sacrifices without which structural reform cannot succeed.

Gorbachev showed a profound insight into the nature of reform when he wrote that "everyone will probably have to make sacrifices at the first stage of perestroika, but some will have to give up for good the privileges they do not deserve".

As long as Whites are not prepared to slaughter many of their golden calves, we will remain wandering in the desert of apartheid. And as long as they are not prepared to relinquish some of their misguided beliefs - the so-called holy cows - reform will also not succeed.

But cannot we expect the government to take the initiative in getting rid of these golden calves and holy cows? I fear not as long as this government remains as committed to the status quo and the bureaucracy, it will not even allow the painful and messy business of calf and cow slaughtering by non-governmental reform processes. It has too high a stake in these holy animals.

In the meantime the fattening of these animals will not bring salvation to anybody. In the longer run it will not even bring earthly salvation. We face the prospect that in the declining economy many of the holy animals may die from a lack of economic fodder.

The racial and tribal obsession of the Afrikaners

To mobilize growing party political support in the decades after 1948, the NP used a double strategy: it launched propaganda campaigns to strengthen the racial and tribal prejudices of the Afrikaners and used its power to compensate its mainly Afrikaner supporters with all kinds of favours. These games were played harder and harder to deliver growing party political support - at least until the seventies.

The propaganda strategy was based on closely integrated programmes. Firstly, the racial fear of the Whites (and

especially the Afrikaners) of being overrun by Blacks was fanned by propaganda which exacerbated these fears. At the same time this fear was allayed by the enactment of more and more apartheid laws and structures and by the ideological prospects of a White promised land.

Secondly, the tribal prejudices and coherence of the Afrikaners were also stimulated (at least until South Africa became a republic) by carefully cultivating the mistrust against English-speakers and by emphasizing the perceived injustices inflicted on Afrikaners and their culture by British colonialism and capitalism.

Thirdly, the NP propaganda was at its most destructive in casting suspicion on all political parties to its left in the White political arena. These parties were stigmatized as "Boerehaters", "Jingo's", "kaffir-boeties", "White sell-outs", "liberals" and "radicals". These accusations played an important role in the humiliation and subsequent destruction of the United Party and in undermining the viability of the PFP. To paint a liberal free-enterprise party like the PFP pink and even red and to blame it for almost all the radical trends in South Africa, is ridiculous. In its propaganda attack on the left the NP is unscrupulous but to what avail?

Fourthly, the NP was unabashed in its favouritism towards its mainly Afrikaner supporters. This tribal patronage may have had merit when many Afrikaners were still poor-Whites. But it continued until the early eighties when the decline of the country's fiscal capacity and the growth of bureaucracy forced a curtailment.

While this pro-Afrikaner strategy of propaganda-cum-favouritism has been to the political advantage of the NP for three decades, it caused irreparable long-term damage to South Africa. It

intensified the potential (and subsequently also the actual) group conflict endemic to our situation.

During the first half of the century and especially during the prosperous forties, strong centripetal forces (or a melting-pot process) gained momentum and succeeded in creating various cross-cutting cleavages. But the apartheid policy, the tribal and racial propaganda and Afrikaner favouritism put this process very much in reverse gear.

Only during the prosperous sixties and early seventies did the economic interdependence of all groups start to exert itself again. This undeniable economic integration forced the NP during the seventies to scale down its divisive tribal and racial propaganda. And, ironically enough, deteriorating economic and fiscal conditions in the early eighties, in their turn, forced the NP to curtail its favouritism towards its supporters, and especially towards the farmers.

The fact that the NP was forced to scale down its racial propaganda and to curtail its favouritism, led directly to the growth of the extreme right. The NP should be the last to complain about the propaganda methods or the popularity of the extreme right parties among Afrikaners. A governing party that has maintained itself for so long by sowing the dragon's teeth of intolerance, prejudice and sectional patronage, deserves to reap the ugly monsters of racial hate and tribal obsession. This harvest is the tragedy of South Africa.

From 1961 to 1981 between 85 and 90 per cent of the Afrikaners voted for the NP. In 1987 only 50 per cent voted NP. Almost 60 per cent of the English-speakers who voted, voted NP. Yet the NP has done nothing to acknowledge its changed constituency. This is not surprising. The current wisdom in the NP remains that it cannot trust the English-speakers and that it cannot build an

Afrikaner castle on shifting English loyalties. Afrikaner tribalism is still alive and well and lives in the NP caucus.

Imagine what would have happened to the Israelites if one of the tribes had consolidated its power and used a divisive strategy of propaganda-cum-favouritism to promote only its own journey towards the Promised Land. Then the people of Israel would in all probability still have been wandering around in the Sinai desert ...

The total misinterpretation of the "total onslaught"

The decline in the government's legitimacy necessitated the development of a new theory to justify its actions. This justification is increasingly found in the "total onslaught" that has to be counteracted by an effective "total strategy".

Since the beginning of the seventies Mr Botha and his generals have strengthened the defence lobby by emphasizing the dangers of this "total onslaught". It is seen as a conspiracy against South Africa, organized and orchestrated mainly from Moscow, with the sole purpose of undermining the Christian, Western and White civilization in South Africa and to replace it with a communist regime. Subsequently, also certain liberal and radical elements and sanctioners in the West are regarded as key organisers and co-conspirators. Lately internal opposition against the government and the NP has also subtly been presented as part of this onslaught.

This theory has become a "total interpretation". Everything that can be branded as negative or hostile from the point of view of the government (and especially the NP), is propagandistically slotted-in as part of the total onslaught and used by the government as an argument for additional measures as part of the total strategy.

But is there a world-wide total onslaught or conspiracy against South Africa? It would be more correct to describe it as a widespread onslaught against apartheid, against other undemocratic and unjust measures and against the government's defiant attitude towards the outside world. But to present the external and internal campaigns against the government's maintenance of apartheid as a total conspiracy against civilization in South Africa, can only be called a total misinterpretation.

This does not deny that many of the external and internal measures designed to demonstrate strong opposition to apartheid are harming South Africa. On the contrary. Their effects are extremely harmful and can in the long run be devastating.

It also does not deny that the Soviet Union and revolutionary groups are trying to exploit South Africa's vulnerable position. This, however, is no justification for the attitude that Soviet imperialism and the pressures from other countries against the continuation of apartheid are part of an integrated total conspiracy against Western civilization in South Africa.

This total misinterpretation of the world-wide opposition to the government's apartheid must seriously undermine the government's ability to distinguish between dangerous and less dangerous, and between real and imaginary threats against South Africa.

We have ample reason to fear that these misinterpretations have already given rise to government actions that have not strengthened the country, but have rather seriously weakened it. It is extremely important that the real villain and the real purpose of the harmful actions against South Africa should be identified correctly. But given the government's attachment to its own misinterpretations, such identification lies clearly outside its grasp.

During the NP's 40 uninterrupted years in office, so many conceptual blockades and stereotyped prejudices have developed (or fossilised) in the party's thought-processes that it is perhaps not reasonable to expect from it proper, new and creative problem identification. Too much ideological and propagandistic capital has been invested in policy approaches to expect them to abandon it for something more relevant and nearer the truth.

The government flatters itself by describing its policy as a total strategy. Such a policy would have implied a master-plan that would contribute - at least over the long run - to a solution of South Africa's problems and especially the problems connected with apartheid. Such policy measures are conspicuously absent in "total strategy". The strategy is in fact nothing but a total tactic to maintain the status quo and the position of the privilegentsia while it allows South Africa's international relations to deteriorate alarmingly.

An important purpose of the government's onslaught propaganda is to convince the White electorate that South Africa's problems originated almost completely outside the country. If this great delusion could be swallowed by the electorate - and there are indications that it has already happened to an alarming extent - they will accept the government's argument that nobody can expect it to do something about these problems. With a propaganda flip-flop many of South Africa's problems are "exported" and put squarely inside the boundaries of other countries!

There are, alas, indications that the government is inclined to swallow its own propaganda about the foreign origin of many of South Africa's problems. It has become almost impossible to explain either the government's "do-nothingism" about the growing international isolation or its defiant attitude towards the rest of the world in other terms than the government's own belief in its own propaganda.

Given the destructive nature of sanctions and boycotts, all South Africans have reason for moral indignation against those who apply them. But do the sanctioneers and boycotters have alternative and less destructive methods at their disposal to communicate their strong moral opposition to the government's continuation of apartheid? Is the government not complicating the situation by claiming to be the true and only bastion of Christian and Western values in South Africa, and at the same time by persisting with apartheid? Is this claim not undermining the accusation of hypocrisy often directed by us against foreign critics?

These questions are asked to give an indication of the kind of moral crisis in which ordinary South Africans have become caught. These questions have become part of the South African moral dilemma.

The Economic Catch-22 situation

After 40 years of political and economic mismanagement and an obstinate refusal to address the real nature of the South African problem, the NP has manoeuvred itself and the rest of the country into an almost inextricable economic Catch-22 situation.

The South African problem has become internationalized to such an extent that we must abolish apartheid and institutionalize (adequate) Black representation in the central parliament. If we refrain from doing that South Africa will remain trapped in a vicious circle of growing international isolation, aggravating poverty, escalating urban violence and a shrinking capability to afford adequate socio-economic and constitutional reform.

South Africa's growth since 1973 has been very poor. Between 1960 and 1973 the per capita-income increased by 3 per cent annually. It was an excellent performance. But since 1973 the per capita-income has declined by 0,6 per cent annually! We are in the grip

of a relentless process of impoverishment. The growing international isolation has very much to do with this. The recent curtailment of our "overheated" economy at the annual growth rate of only 2,5 per cent bears testimony to a bleak future for the country and emphasizes our dependency on foreign capital.

Given this poor growth since 1973 and the decline in the tax capacity, we can hardly (if at all) afford to abolish apartheid and to institutionalize effective parliamentary bargaining power for Blacks. Such steps would in all probability lead to a further and disastrous overstraining of the already seriously weakened siege economy.

Many South Africans still display a naïve optimism about the economic and political prospects. The fact that the severely restricted flow of information has kept them in the dark about the real nature and the causes of the crisis, can perhaps partly explain their optimism. But apparently some based their optimism on the belief that if the Whites (and especially the Afrikaner volk) really got bogged down in a desert of problems, manna would be supplied to them as was supplied to the Israelites in the desert. If ever there was a mistaken belief, it is this one

The leadership crisis

South Africans find themselves in a dismal position. The White oases created in the desert of apartheid are shrinking. The Whites are spoiled by undeserved privileges that cannot be maintained. Blacks had to carry a large part of the burden of the decline in the per capita-income. They are becoming more and more embittered. A large and growing section of Afrikaners are obsessed with a revived racial hate and tribal intolerance. English-speakers are as materealistic as ever. An avalanche of propaganda and a lack of information are keeping people in the dark about the true nature of the mounting crisis. International

isolation is mounting. The system has become more and more radicalized.

Reform has become a bad word. It has become a synonym for the co-optation of a White and a Black privilegentsia into bureaucratic structures. An alarming concentration of power and decision-making has taken place at the hands of the almost invisible securocrats. Democratic freedom and human rights are constantly eroded while the human dignity of many people (mainly Blacks) are still disregarded.

During their wanderings in the Sinai desert the Israelites were fortunate to have a wise and humble man like Moses as their leader. He used his symbolic authority to admonish them about their errors and their worshipping of golden calves. His Mosaic laws were not only concerned with good order but mainly with social justice and the relief of misery. He spent a lifetime to persuade the Israelites to become worthy of entering their Promised Land. He used all the symbolism at his disposal to tell his people the truth and to convince them of the holy merit of it.

We South Africans are in dire need of wise and humble leadership endowed with the symbolic authority to admonish us, to destroy both our golden calves and our holy cows to break down all the artificial barriers, to sharpen our senses for social justice, to persuade us to become worthy and generous enough for structural reform. But above all, we need honest leadership to tell us the truth, to encourage us to search for it ourselves, and to honour it no matter how painful it is