

Adam Ashforth

A LETTER FROM SOWETO

There is a dog in Snake Park, a settlement on the outskirts of Soweto, called De Klerk. He is a white dog. Well, he would be white if he could shed the fine brown dust of this place. In the evenings when the gates are being locked you can hear a Zulu voice hurling the name at the darkening shacks: "De Klerk, De Klerk, Woza, De Klerk!" Come, De Klerk. During the day, De Klerk roams the streets of Snake Park with the pack. But at night's fall, the canine state president belongs in the yard. His mission is clear: guard the house. The house, a tin and asbestos shack, is a butcher's shop.

De Klerk the dog and the butcher shop in Snake Park belong to Mr. Dladla. When discussing politics, Dladla is fond of saying: "Government is a crook." Although Dladla is a staunch supporter of the African National Congress (ANC), and fully expects its victory in the elections next April, whatever happens in the future, his dog De Klerk, along with half a dozen other canine security agents, will remain at his post. For while many people have great expectations that one day "The People Shall Govern," it is hard to see how, when that day dawns, the mess created under the name "apartheid" can easily be cleaned up. It is harder still to see how justice might be secured for the poor and oppressed in South Africa given the massive incompetence and corruption of public institutions. And as St. Augustine once noted, "Without justice what is government but a great robbery?"

At the memorial service for Chris Hani, Communist party secretary-general assassinated last April, ANC President Nelson Mandela exhorted his followers not to live in the past but to build for the future. On an everyday basis millions of people across the country are doing just that. There is a tremendous strength and resilience in people like those with whom I stay in the Mapetla Extension district of Soweto. They have managed to build a thriving community in the face of the harsh conditions of apartheid. I am constantly inspired by

people like my friends the Sello family, who, despite living cramped in a one-room tin shack in a dusty settlement, can turn out their children every morning immaculately dressed in their school uniforms and eager to learn. But when I try to analyze the prospects for transformation of the major institutions of state and economic power, I find it hard not to despair.

Generally speaking, the situation here is volatile and will probably become more so as the election approaches. A small group of men with guns can cause a lot of trouble. As the endemic violence of the past few years and the events surrounding the assassination of Chris Hani demonstrate, there is no shortage either of trigger-happy men or of guns. If the people of South Africa are ever to succeed in creating a civilized political sphere, they will have to devise policies to deal with these men and their weapons. This will not be easy, given the legacy of apartheid. For it will eventually require a new government, most likely with Nelson Mandela as president, calling on armed forces commanded mostly by Afrikaners to suppress people on the white right wing (whom those commanders consider their brother Boers) while also calling on the same forces to suppress black militants (whom many in the ANC see as brothers).

"The Fight"

Most of the young activists I know in Soweto are locked into forms of politics that are hardly appropriate, nor are they equipped with the skills necessary, for the task of building a new state. The predominant metaphor of political action here is the "fight." And there is no shortage of people, mostly young and male, for whom fighting—in all its form—is second nature. Fewer know how to build or harness angry energies into creative solutions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the schools and colleges of Soweto where the limited opportunities

for advancement are constantly squandered in the name of one "struggle" or other. For one example, some of the boys at Mapetla Tswana High School, nicknamed the "Nicaragua School of Socialism" regularly hit "targets" in the form of delivery vehicles. Sometimes they just stone vans, other days they might hijack a vehicle and burn it in the schoolyard, provoking fights with the police and reliving the glory days of *umzabalazo* (the struggle). Such "revolutionary actions" succeed in canceling classes and drying up supplies of milk and bread to the neighborhood for a few days.

The mothers of Soweto know the consequences of fighting too well. It is upon their shoulders that the heaviest burdens fall when the bodies have to be healed or buried; and it is all too easy for simple disputes or misunderstandings to become violent feuds. When people are in dispute, the mother of the family I stay with, MaMfete, strives to sit them down to talk, to work out a solution to their problems. She will gather the antagonists in her kitchen and listen to their explanations. When everyone has been heard, MaMfete will speak, quietly analyzing the accounts and pointing out the various "mistakes" (her term) which have been made. Generally, people will then acknowledge what they have done and make amends. But if they cannot talk in a civil and respectful manner—like Mandla (the name means "Power"), who, brimming with righteous indignation one afternoon in October, lashed the back of his girlfriend with an electrical cable to punish her for talking to another man—MaMfete will settle for peace without justice. "There is no justice in this place," MaMfete told me on that occasion. There is rarely any point in going to the police, for they are mostly vicious, corrupt, and incompetent; nothing can be done. And seeking justice by private means can be a dicey business, especially when angry young men are involved.

Some months back, some "comrades" and I were engaged in such dicey "justice"—we tried to find a way to "discipline" (a favorite South African word) a thug in the Mapetla district of Soweto near where I stay. South Africa is one of the few places left on the planet where the appellation "comrade" is mutually pleasing. In Soweto it is loosely used to identify members and supporters of "progressive" organizations,—that is, *not* Inkatha, the Zulu nationalists led by Chief Buthelezi—and to distinguish political activists from criminals. The criminals are known as "thugs" or "tstotsis." Sometimes they carry the name with pride. In this instance, a comrade friend of ours had been stabbed by a local thug. So some young activists convened a meeting to discuss the

issue. I joined them because I've known them all for a long time. I was happy to be included, but had no intention of showing my white face at the thug's door demanding retribution.

At five o'clock we gathered at Vusi's house. Vusi (not his real name) is a young man in his early twenties whom I met a couple of years ago when he was active in the war against the Inkatha members at the Merafe Hostel in Mapetla. Along with several others, he is serving a suspended sentence for the murder of a thug who was raping girls in the area. They beat the offender to death with shovels after he raped Vusi's cousin.

Vusi is a family man. He is living with his mother, his girlfriend, and their baby, trying to make a living sewing clothes. When we arrived he was working with an old Singer hand winder, hemming a pair of blue jeans. They live in one of the two-room houses of Phiri district of Soweto. Four comrades are already there when we arrive. The young man with the thug problem is smoking a huge joint. No-one else joins him, though the fag-ends of cigarettes are passed from hand to hand before they die.

We had some difficulty getting the story straight. It seems that the aggrieved comrade, let's call him Mathatha, was involved in a complicated domestic dispute with his stepsister and stepfather. Mathatha's mother, who usually sides with her son, had on this occasion backed the others. His name had been taken off the Lodger's Certificate, which means he won't be able to inherit the house when his mother dies, nor even stay on as a lodger. The details, though, are murky. The thug who stabbed him is his stepsister's boyfriend. What kind of dispute they had was never made clear. But it was clear that Mathatha felt exposed on the streets because two of his friends had recently left the country for training in the ANC military wing (the *Umkhonto We Sizwe*.) The ANC was, and probably still is, recruiting and training such volunteers as conventional soldiers in expectation of the eventual integration of *Umkhonto* with the South African Defense Force.

Vusi suggested that the correct procedure to follow before disarming and disciplining the thug was to inform the secretary of the Civic Association and speak to Mathatha's mother. But Mathatha objected. He did not want anyone speaking to his mother. The facts were simple, he argued. He had been stabbed by that thug, who was part of a group of six or seven thugs. They have only one gun, a 9mm pistol, and the first priority, Vusi now argued, was to disarm them. Vusi has experience in this line

of work having successfully relieved several policemen of their weapons.

During the discussion, four other comrades arrived. We were now ten. Consensus was reached. It was resolved that Monday evening at five o'clock the comrades, along with twenty or thirty "reinforcements," would go in groups of two and three to the culprit's place and issue a "warning."

After the meeting, my friend Siphon was very concerned that the delegation be coolheaded. For if the thug is humiliated he can later avenge himself, attacking the comrades one by one. If the comrades start knocking him around instead of just talking to him, the fight may escalate and people will die. It's a question of balance. Another friend of mine reckons that the only way to deal with such an offender, if you are really serious, is to get a gun and kill him in the dead of night without being seen by anyone. (You can easily get a 9mm pistol and a few bullets for fifty rands [about \$17].) That way you get rid of your problem without the risk of having your house burned down and your family endangered.

When the appointed hour arrived and the comrades assembled at Phiri, Mathatha was nowhere to be found. Four of the comrades were in a trigger-happy mood, for they were about to leave the country for military training in *Umkhonto We Sizwe*. Eventually Mathatha turned up, drunk and three hours late. His comrades were not impressed, so nothing happened.

Future Problems

If justice, peace, and prosperity are ever to be secured for the people of Soweto, it can only be as a result of the establishment of a legitimate system of government establishing conditions of personal security at the level of the state as a whole. In recent years the South African police have been trying to shed their image as enforcers of apartheid. But it will be a long time before they have any credibility in black communities, even under a black national government. The ANC seems set to take the front seat in government in the near future; and it is certainly the ambition of all the liberation movements to create a responsive system of policing and justice, along with a commitment to providing work and opportunities for all. Whether democratically elected governments will in fact be able to take the reins of state power is, however, another matter.

Most of the people I know in Soweto support Nelson Mandela and the ANC. The ANC is confident that it enjoys majority support within the country as a whole. But the problem for the ANC is

that it enjoys very little support among people holding key positions within the state and the economy, most of whom are white. In the short-to-medium term, too few of the ANC's supporters will be sufficiently qualified to move into these key positions. The problem is how to transform the system while maintaining the state infrastructure and services that already exist. Without the assistance, if not the active support, of the incumbent bureaucrats, particularly the armed bureaucrats, capitalists, members of the professions, and managers, neither the ANC nor any other party, could govern this large, complex, and powerful state. Even with that assistance, corruption and incompetence will remain the norm.

Over the past couple of years, the ANC leadership has come to recognize the limitation on its potential power as a majority rule government. It has proposed the idea of a "Government of National Unity and Reconstruction" (which the present National party government is pleased to refer to as "power-sharing"). This would be a "transitional" solution during the period—the expectation is five years—between the election of a constituent assembly next April and the formal institution of a new constitution.

An executive body of state would be established, following national elections for a constituent assembly, comprised of members nominated by all significant parties. Such a body would most likely be dominated by the ANC and the National party. There is widespread discontent in the black townships, however, over the leadership's acceptance of power-sharing with the "regime." Many younger militants are beginning to suspect that the spoils of the struggle are not going to fall their way.

Some of my more militant friends have left the ANC and moved into the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), attracted by the more revolutionary rhetoric and the continuing commitment to "armed struggle." But the PAC seems to be a shambles as an organization. Its political leadership does not appear able to coordinate with its external military organization, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). This caused the PAC much embarrassment during a recent spate of attacks on white people attributed to APLA's "Year of the Great Storm" campaign. The situation in South Africa these days is so confused that angry young men can easily band together to launch attacks on the police or white people, call themselves "APLA" and be trumpeted as such in the media, while the PAC leadership, both

political and military, will have no idea who their warriors are.

Although some PAC members claim there is an "Africanist" philosophy, which their organization upholds, few people that I have met can articulate it in terms radically different from those embraced by the broad ideological umbrella of the Congress Alliance (ANC, Communist party, and Congress of South African Trade Unions). So, as one comrade who left the ANC Youth League to join APLA put it: If PAC joins negotiations I may as well go back to ANC because, in elections, at least they can win." It is hard to imagine the PAC ever governing a state, yet if it maintains its political purity as a radical opposition, it could serve as a lightning rod for the manifold discontents of black South Africans under an ANC government.

Race Politics

The governing party of apartheid, the National party, also seems to be increasingly confident that it can win majority support in the polls, if not at the first vote for a constituent assembly, then at the next vote (probably five years hence) for a government under a new constitution. According to press reports, the National party probably enjoys majority support among the so-called "Coloured," "Indian," and "White" populations. It may also be able to form alliances with conservative African political organizations (which may eventually include Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom party). In time, the National party may be able to capitalize on the growing discontent among Africans who worry that "Liberation Movements" may not be able to deliver the work and security people desire. Over the past few years in Soweto, unemployment and economic hardship have been increasing, and it is not so unusual to hear people harking back cynically to the bad old days of apartheid—when at least you could get a job.

An abiding question for any future government remains the destructive potential of the white right wing. My experience, as a white man who has lived in Soweto off and on over several years, persuades me that the extent of racial animosity toward whites among black South Africans is remarkably small. People are generally committed to the idea of a

common humanity; "Black and white should live together" is the common refrain. Given the extent of the brutality inflicted upon African people and the stupidity of the collective insult that Europeans have wreaked upon African society in the name of colonialism and apartheid, this commitment to "nonracialism" (an official doctrine of the ANC) is extraordinary.

Yet, ironically, it was perhaps the very existence of apartheid itself, the existence of an evil system that officially categorized people according to notions of "race" and against which people could unite in a struggle for justice, equality, and a better life, that kept overt racial antagonism at bay. Even the more exclusivist political ideologies such as Pan Africanism and Black Consciousness have been at pains, at least in their official pronouncements, to denounce racism and racialist thinking. The slow demise of apartheid, however, also undoes the sense that the daily pains of a hard life are linked to inevitable progress toward freedom. In the three years since the liberation movements were unbanned and Nelson Mandela released from prison, more particularly since the civil war with Inkatha reached Soweto in August 1990, despair has become much more evident. If the promise of better things is not realized soon in a new South Africa, the hope that nurtured the moral ascendancy of the anti-apartheid movements may turn to a pervasive despair. Then the lunacies of the white right wing might provoke in black people racial hatred that has hitherto been manifested mostly as "crime," giving it the political edge white South Africans have long dreaded.

So much for politics. The elections will come in 1994 and life will go on. The dogs will continue to bark at night; some will be chained, some will roam free. Winter is settling in, and with it the dry season. Nights are getting cold and the winds are coming to whip up the dust. When the winds stop, every surface in Soweto's houses will be covered with fine brown powder. Then the women will set to work dusting and polishing before the winds blow again tomorrow. The yards must be swept, too, and the "stoeps" (porches) and windowsills polished black or red.

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Every morning, Ndi, our next-door neighbor, sweeps her yard. One arm behind her back, like her mother before her, she bends double as she flicks the short straw switch across the hard clay ground. Building upon her mother's labors in the yard of the four-room "matchbox" house, which

the grandfather sitting under the tree and his family occupied in 1964, Ndi has already swept the yard to a depth of six inches below the level of the foundations. The new South Africa might arrive before she needs a step ladder to get into the house. □

Zhores Medvedev

THE DEATH OF BIG SCIENCE IN RUSSIA

From 1987 to 1991 the largest construction project in the Soviet Union was neither a new hydroelectric station nor an oil pipeline. It was the world's largest proton synchrotron accelerator in Protvino, a small science town about a hundred kilometers south of Moscow. The twenty-one-kilometer-long underground tunnel ring with a diameter of five meters (comparable to the circle line of the Moscow metro) had already been excavated, and people were working around the clock to assemble the massive vacuum chamber with large bending and focusing superconducting magnets, each six meters long and weighing many tons. A special factory had been built in Serpukhov, a nearby industrial city, to manufacture the two thousand magnets needed for the accelerator. The world's largest helium liquefying plant, designed to generate thirty thousand liters of liquid helium per hour, was also under construction. Liquid helium was required to keep the temperature in the giant vacuum chamber as close to absolute zero as possible.

The accelerator (known as UNK, from the Russian term for acceleration storage complex) was expected to begin fixed target experiments in 1993. It belonged to the Institute of High Energy Physics, part of the research network of the Soviet military-industrial nuclear empire, commonly known as Minsredmash (short for the USSR Ministry of Medium Machinery). Soviet atomic scientists had never had to consider costs, even when they rose to

billions of rubles. Protvino had already become famous among particle physicists because its previous proton accelerator, one kilometer long and with an acceleration energy of seventy-six billion electron-volts (76 GeV), had also been the largest in the world when it was commissioned in 1967. A higher particle energy (four hundred GeV) was only achieved in 1972, when a larger synchrotron, seven kilometers in length, was built by the U.S. National Accelerator Laboratory in Illinois.

The UNK was designed for three trillion electron-volts (three TeV) energies. A second ring for the acceleration of protons in the opposite direction was expected to be added and linked to the first part of UNK in 1995. The system would be transformed into a six TeV collider, giving Soviet physicists the unique opportunity to make discoveries in the trillion electron-volt range. The nearest American rival, the Superconducting Super Collider, an eighty-four-kilometer-long, twenty-TeV giant costing \$8.5 billion, had been under construction in Texas since 1990 and was not expected to be able to smash protons until 1999.

Construction and assembly work in Protvino slowed down, however, toward the end of 1991 and ground to a halt in 1992. The paymaster, Minsredmash, had disappeared along with Gorbachev's government and the USSR itself. A new, smaller Russia embarking on "shock therapy" economic reform did not have the means to subsidize the