

# APARTHEID AND THE ANTICIPATION OF APOCALYPSE: THE SUPREME STRATEGIES OF THE NATIONAL PARTY GOVERNMENT AND THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, 1980-1989: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## *Abstract*

*By 1980 the National Party government of South Africa and the most prominent anti-apartheid organisation, the African National Congress (ANC), had moulded multidimensional strategies of epic proportions with which to seize and maintain power. The government perceived the global campaign against South Africa's political **status quo** as a so-called total onslaught operating in all possible socio-economic and political spheres. In reaction it engineered a strategy to counter it in all possible spheres the total strategy. Its implementation implied a reorganisation of South African politics and society on an unimaginable scale. Simultaneously the most important anti-government organisation was overhauling itself. After the turmoil of the late 1970s, the African National Congress determined that the climate was ripe to launch a multidimensional offensive against the minority regime. The execution of these strategies, during the 1980s, culminated in sweeping violent political conflict and socio-economic unrest. A political power play was effected with the actions and reactions of each side thrusting South Africa ever closer to the brink of a man-made apocalypse. These separate strategies will be analysed in an historical perspective.*

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## 1. ARMING FOR ARMAGEDDON: THE TOTAL STRATEGY OF THE NATIONAL PARTY GOVERNMENT

“Dr Verwoerd foresaw that South Africa would be facing unprecedented pressures”, said PW Botha, “and instructed me to contemplate a strategy in this regard. There was a total onslaught – psychological, political, economic and military.”<sup>2</sup> The genesis of a total onslaught, as perceived by the National Party, and its subsequent formulation of a counter total strategy both lie in the political changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Colonialism was coming to an end in Africa, robbing the apartheid state of its white neighbours and drawing more unwanted attention to its system of government. The Cold War’s two main superpowers were jostling for support amongst Africa’s new and scathingly anti-apartheid leadership. Since 1952 the United Nations’ General Assembly had annually condemned apartheid. While

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2 J-A Stemmet. Private collection. Interview with PW Botha, 13 October 2000.

apartheid *per se* was controversial enough, within the apartheid state incidents of a recurring nature were further blemishing the country's stature. Incidents such as the Sharpeville shootings (1960), the Rivonia trial (1963), the Soweto riots (1976) and the police's murder of activist Steve Biko (1977) were fuelling the global anti-apartheid dynamo. Furthermore, the state's control of Namibia and its military inroads into Angola were exacerbating matters. By the late 1970s, while the Nationalists were embroiled in the so-called Information Scandal, culminating in the ousting of Prime Minister John Vorster, the country's real growth rate for 1978 was zero and at the time of the Soweto riots there were 2 000 000 unemployed blacks.<sup>3</sup> The state perceived the diverse ever-increasing pressures not merely as the result of sustaining an infamous political system within a hostile world, but as part of a sprawling conspiracy; apartheid was merely an emotional catchphrase to camouflage the true objective – the overthrow of South Africa. Although the idea of a total war was anything but new (Sun Tzu described it in 200 BC), the minority regime's finer conceptualisation was unique. The crux of the total onslaught, as perceived by the Nationalists, was that the entire anti-apartheid campaign and struggle was part of an international conspiracy, led by the Soviet Union, to take control of South Africa (the continent's locomotive) as part of a Kremlin-engineered plot to conquer and rule the world. The onslaught was intricately multifaceted, encompassing *all* possible spheres. Any pressure on South Africa – irrespective whether explicitly communist in origin – furthered the onslaught. To muster support for this campaign, the country's internal situation was exaggerated and exploited under the anti-apartheid banner.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly even bastions of anti-communism were duped. "Russian expansionism is threatening us and in spite of that other western countries are reluctant to acknowledge our real value", explained PW Botha.<sup>5</sup>

Starting in 1971 with the Potgieter Commission, the state began to conceptualise the threat and strategise a response. The assault was a so-called total war in which ideas were more powerful than any military force; it was at once a physical and psychological manifestation. The reaction to this *total onslaught* had to be a *total strategy*. The latter was based on a *carrot* and *stick* approach. The regime needed to redress its internal position in order to better its African position, so that it could improve its international position. Success essentially lay in

3 T Cameron (ed.), *Nuwe geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (Pretoria, 1988), pp. 286, 288; C Alden, *Apartheid's last stand* (Johannesburg, 1996), p. 33; L Thompson, *A history of South Africa* (Cape Town, 2001), pp. 207-208; P Frankel *et al.*, *State, resistance and change in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989), p. 53.

4 PW Botha. Private collection. Archive for Contemporary Affairs (ARCA) University of the Free State, Bloemfontein: PV 203/ PS 12/6/1; JJJ Scholtz, *Fighter and reformer – extracts from the speeches by PW Botha* (Pretoria, 1989), p. 33.

5 H Murray, "Interview: PW Botha", *Leadership SA* 2(3), Spring, 1983, p. 20.

numbers. The government needed to gain a non-white support base. If it succeeded (apart from splintering the local anti-apartheid politics) it could present itself to an anti-apartheid globe as the soundest option for South Africa. The *whites-only* system needed the support of non-whites in order to guarantee the minority power's longevity. Reforming apartheid (without actually jeopardising the bedrock of minority power) and the socio-economic upliftment of black communities formed the *carrot* of the epic premise. Hereby it could dissolve brewing local discontent and prevent disruptions while being seen as making positive socio-economic inroads into Africa and thus attracting foreign goodwill and investment. The *stick* was there to simultaneously assure whites of their safety, assure its enemies of its overwhelming might, and assure all groups that Pretoria was reforming from a position of unquestionable strength. It revolved around bolstering an already massive military security complex; expanding its judicial rights and freedoms while boosting its numbers and resources.<sup>6</sup> Immense restructuring of South African politics and society was implied. The 1977 White Paper on Defence explicitly called for unified control of all of the state's resources to thwart the multidimensional onslaught.<sup>7</sup>

Strategically it meant the fusion of military, administrative, judicial and legislative powers. Democracy implies these sectors' separateness; the question was how to attain unified command without jeopardising the very democratic values such a strategic unification sought to protect.<sup>8</sup> It demanded a structural circumvolution. Through the National Security Management System the strategy would become practical reality.<sup>9</sup> This system would oversee the strategic managerial synthesis of internal, external and defence policies. It operated on nine separate levels. The pinnacle was, technically, the Cabinet. Directly below was the State Security Council (consisting of executive security chiefs and relevant ministers) which, as with the Cabinet, was chaired by the State President. Subordinate to the State Security Council was a Working Committee which had to ensure that the Council's decisions were implemented. The Secretariat of the State Security Council, just below the Working Committee, had to process raw intelligence. This was followed by 13 interdepartmental committees (each focusing on a specific topic such as manpower or transport) which had to regulate interdepartmental co-ordination. The lowest tier was the Joint Management Centres (basically grass-roots extensions of the State Security Council) which were situated, roughly, where today's provinces are. These were again split into sub-Joint Management Centres and the smallest –

6 PW Botha. Private collection. AREA: PV 203, PS 4/2/181; Alden, p. 44; Scholtz, pp.17-18.

7 Alden, p. 38.

8 D Harrison, *The white tribe of Africa* (London, 1981), p. 268.

9 H Kotze, "Regering agter die skerm: burokrasie het hef in die hande", *Insig*, March 1989, p. 11.

literally at street level – the mini-Joint Management Centres.<sup>10</sup> The State Security Council was formed in 1972 in an advisory capacity. Under Prime Minister John Vorster it gathered only a dozen times whereas his successor, PW Botha, the former Minister of Defence, would go on to give it profound prominence.<sup>11</sup> In fact, some commentators noted that the Council at times appeared to be more influential than the Cabinet. The 1983 Constitution, in effect, turned Parliament, and subsequently the Cabinet, into a multiracial institution and as such could no longer act as a whites-only decision-making body. Stacked with some of the country's most influential power brokers, the all-white State Security Council seemed to erode the significance of Cabinet.<sup>12</sup> Brian Pottinger wrote that this “limiting of participation” became a trademark of the Botha administration, whereby influential political role players of any real influence consisted of an “ever-narrowing circle of ministers briefed by an elite group of security-orientated officials within the government”.<sup>13</sup> The government had spun a structural net across the country with which to garner information and intelligence, co-ordinate interdepartmental co-operation and administer the implementation of decisions. Through this conduit the total strategy's *carrot* and *stick* would be overseen.

## 2. THE REFORMIST WAND: REFORM INITIATIVES UNDER THE TOTAL STRATEGY

Prime Minister PW Botha, in 1979, presented the enlightened cornerstone of the total strategy as a Twelve Point Plan. These principles, covering the regime's vision, dealt with the local and foreign situation.<sup>14</sup> It proposed the division of powers between whites, Coloureds and Indians – concerning common interests – and consultation, as equals, between the races, “but I am not in favour of a system of compulsory integration in South Africa”. The National leader also declared his

10 J-A Stemmet. Private collection. Correspondence received from Magnus Malan, 8 August 2000; W Ebersohn, “The headmen”, *Leadership SA* 7(5), 1988, p. 16; A Seegers, *The military in the making of modern South Africa* (New York, 1996), p. 166.

11 J Dugard (ed.), *Update South Africa the last years of apartheid* (Itacha, 1992), p. 58. See section below.

12 J-A Stemmet. Private collection. Interview with JP de Lange, 28 June 2000; B Dean, “Control by cabal”, *Leadership SA* 5(4), 1986, p. 60; FvZ Slabbert, *The last white parliament* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 169.

13 B Pottinger, *The imperial presidency PW Botha the first 10 years* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 43.

14 As far as Africa was concerned it strove for a constellation of Southern African States. Goodwill met cooperation and those that meddled in South Africa's affairs would face retribution. Africa was distrustful and uncomfortable with the apartheid state; success was limited, the non-aggression agreement between Pretoria and Mozambique was arguably the highlight. Also see section below.

intent to eradicate “hurtful and unnecessary discriminatory measures”.<sup>15</sup> Pretoria tackled the maze of so-called petty apartheid laws and rules. By 1986 the regime had regulations about separate amenities scrapped (and with it the internationally infamous *Whites only* signs). Furthermore, job reservation was removed (broadening non-whites’ economic mobility as the regime was striving to expand a stable black middle class and as such dislodging dangerous discontent). The Mixed Marriages Act (another internationally infamous thorn of apartheid) was repealed and the Immorality Act’s racial aspects were removed too. Unprecedented rights for black labour unions were also ushered in.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the decade the regime would continue scrapping *petty* and at times aspects of *grand* apartheid. The Nationalists’ most epic undertaking, however, was the creation of a multiracial parliament. The Constitution was rewritten and following a triumphant whites-only referendum in 1983 the government unveiled the Tricameral Parliament.<sup>17</sup> The three houses accommodated 178 whites (Assembly), 45 Indians (Delegates) and 85 Coloureds (Representatives). Irrespective of the majority of white seats, parliamentary decision making was set according to General Affairs (defence, foreign affairs, justice, etc.) or Own Affairs (culture, education, local government, health, etc.). Participation of all three races was required for the former category (with whites being in the majority), while the latter was restricted to each race separately.<sup>18</sup> (Exactly what affairs fell into which category generated endless frustrations.) If the houses could not reach a clear agreement the matter was referred to the 60-member President’s Council for arbitration (35 members from all houses; 25 were appointed by the State President, ten had to come from the opposition parties). While South Africa’s minorities each had a house, the majority had to settle for Local Black Councils. (No constitutional or parliamentary shenanigans could allow parliamentary participation without somehow fatally contaminating the heart of white power.)<sup>19</sup> Black communities could also expect socio-economic advances.<sup>20</sup> The new Constitution also combined the position of

15 PW Botha. Private collection. ARCA: PV 203, 4/2/181.

16 *Ibid.*, PS 12/74/1.

17 B Maree, “‘n Maand van geskiedenis”, *Suid-Afrikaanse Panorama* 29(12), December 1984, pp. 1-2.

18 D Oakes (ed.), *Reader’s Digest illustrated history of South Africa – the real story* (New York, 1992), p. 437.

19 Murray, p. 17.

20 Apart from a new approach to health care, housing, education and training, selected black communities (especially those traditionally volatile) were targeted with socio-economic betterment. Apart from the obvious image building, these undertakings could thaw dangerous sparks of discontent. Between 1983 and 1987 Pretoria spent roughly two thousand million rand on close to 2 000 urban renewal projects. These places were known as “oil spots”. The goodwill emanating from these initiatives, the regime reckoned, would spread across the black communities like *oil across water*. A Hochschild, *A mirror at midnight* (London, 1991), p. 200; G Moss & I Obery (eds), *South African Review* 5 (Pretoria, 1989), pp. 81-82.

President and Prime Minister into one executive State President. The latter presided over the Cabinet as well as chairing the State Security Council, plus heading the State President's Council, prompting Deon Geldenhuys and Hennie Kotzé to wonder "whether the new constitutional system could continue functioning without Botha".<sup>21</sup> The reforms seen within apartheid history were truly groundbreaking. The Botha government was *opening up* South African society in a manner which, until then, was inconceivable.<sup>22</sup> Due to the reforms the country's diverse peoples interacted at levels and in ways that was unprecedented (easing future integration). Although improving the lives of millions of people and chipping away at social and cultural barriers, the reform strategy – within the total strategy – would boomerang on the regime.

### 3. THE SECUROCRATIC SJAMBOK: SECURITY UNDER THE TOTAL STRATEGY

"I want to warn those who think that we practise our policies from a position of weakness... If they want to test us, our strength, we will hit back for the sake of South Africa's self-respect", PW Botha, outlining his Twelve Point Plan, declared.<sup>23</sup> The Nationalists, in essence, were offering South Africans two para-ideologies: A so-called *new dispensation* (arrived at through reforms, consultation, co-option) or the *total onslaught* (whoever rejects the former will be regarded as, unavoidably, supporting the latter). Embrace of the first implied experiencing the *wand of reforms* while the second meant feeling the *sjambok of security*.<sup>24</sup> The *stick* of the total strategy was undeniably grandiose. Ever since the 1960s South Africa experienced an immense military build-up. Without foreign backing no country near the apartheid state could risk crossing swords with it.<sup>25</sup> This distinction was in no small way due to the state's sophisticated Armaments Corporation (Armscor). Created in the 1960s to counteract ever-increasing arms embargoes and sanctions, by the early 1980s it was self-sufficient in the production of ammunitions, missiles and small armaments.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, since the early 1970s, in the utmost secrecy, South Africa was developing a nuclear capability for military usage. During the 1980s,

21 D Geldenhuys & H Kotzé, "Man of action", *Leadership SA* 4(2), 1985, p. 12.

22 To such an extent that some Nationalists regarded it as ideological treason and, led by Andries Treurnicht, founded the Conservative Party in 1982.

23 PW Botha. Private collection. ARCA: PV 203, 4/2/181.

24 CD Shearing, "The shifting alliances of reform and resistance", *Indicator SA* 4(1), 1986, p.20; I Liebenberg, *Ideologie in konflik* (Pretoria, 1990), pp. 106-107.

25 In 1979 the English Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that South Africa's military might overshadow the fighting power of Mozambique, Tanzania, Angola, Zambia, Botswana, Malawi and Zimbabwe – combined. Harrison, p. 264.

26 Harrison, p. 264; D Lamb, *The Africans* (London, 1990), p. 317; Anon., *Apartheid the facts* (London, 1991), p. 81.

with the secret assistance of various countries including Israel and Taiwan, the state possessed seven nuclear bombs.<sup>27</sup> This was supplemented with a lethal batch of biochemical weapons.<sup>28</sup> The Botha administration also had a potent intelligence component in the newly established National Intelligence Agency. The sophisticated agency's tentacles snaked through all relevant groupings across South Africa and even into the exiled liberation organisations abroad.<sup>29</sup> Much more obvious was this side of the strategy's foot soldiers, the human face of the *stick*: the South African Police and the South African Defence Force (SADF). As the government was unrolling its reformist policies it was also expanding the jurisdiction of the security services. Before total strategy the apartheid state had already featured a *smorgasbord* of tough security laws and regulations.<sup>30</sup> Possibly the most ominous of the new laws was the Internal Security Act of 1982. The all-enveloping statute, an amalgamation of various laws and regulations, empowered security personnel to detain people for interrogation,<sup>31</sup> ban newspapers, keep persons in preventative detention, ban organisations, restrict individuals' movements and control/restrict gatherings including its dispersal, etc.<sup>32</sup> The 1953 Public Safety Act, enabling the SA President to proclaim a State of Emergency, dramatically further augmented the security forces' rights and freedoms.<sup>33</sup> After political violence had erupted in the spring of 1984, due to intertwined volatile socio-economic factors, Pretoria declared a State of Emergency in July 1985. Except for short periods, the government effectively ruled the rest of the decade by martial law. Each successive State of Emergency was harsher than the previous one.<sup>34</sup>

27 RW Walters, *South Africa and the bomb* (Massachusetts, 1987), pp. 13, 42-45; P Houman & S McQuillan, *The mini-nuke conspiracy* (London, 1995), pp. 146, 211.

28 J-A Stemmet. Private collection. Interview with Magnus Malan, 12 August 2000. The weapons were too powerful and the country/region too small to ever actually use it without destroying South Africa itself. It served as a military-diplomatic deterrent. It deterred any concept of a massive foreign strike on South Africa and in any endgame scenario the minority could always play its *atomic ace* giving it unquestionable leverage. The total strategy as such also addressed these types of apocalyptic scenarios. R Renwick, *Unconventional diplomacy in Southern Africa* (London, 1997) p.53. W Burrows & R Windren, *Critical mass – the dangerous race for super weapons in a fragmented world* (London, 1984), p. 257.

29 Dugard, p. 58; C Crocker, *High noon in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1992), p. 116.

30 M Coleman, *A crime against humanity Analysing the oppression of the apartheid state* (Bellville, 1998), p. 29.

31 If a warrant officer, or higher, was "of the opinion" that a person was somehow stoking "a state of disorder" then the officer "may without warrant arrest that person". Initially such detention could last for 48 hours only; the 1986 Internal Security Amendment Act extended it to 180 days (more or less 3 months).

32 See in entirety: Internal Security Act, 1982, *Government Gazette* 204(8232), 9 June 1982.

33 See in entirety: *Government Gazette* 3964, 12 June 1986.

34 Cameron, p. 543; D Quinn, "From one emergency to another", *Indicator SA* 4(1), Winter, 1986, pp. 24-27; W du Plessis & N Olivier, "11 Junie 1987 – tweede algemene noodtoestand", SA



From 1984 onwards, as political violence became synonymous with South Africa, the police in particular became a symbol of apartheid's dark inhumanity. Under immense pressure from the authorities to permanently squash the radicals as well as being permanently targeted by the ANC and its internal offshoots while equipped with exceptional rights and freedoms, rumours of factual reports about police brutality and sadism became commonplace.<sup>35</sup> In an attempt to supplement police numbers, so-called *Instant Cops (Kitskonstabels)* were recruited from the townships, which only served to worsen matters. With minimal criteria for acceptance and with minimal training these were, legally, members of the police during the States of Emergency. Ruthless, violent and apparently unmanageable these *cops* further worsened the image and task of the police and, as such, further frustrated the regime's overall strategy.<sup>36</sup> Torture, murder and the cover-ups thereof at the hands of the police, in all their guises, fomented loathing amongst the masses at the police in general and the system they symbolised.

The police were not alone in combating the violent political upheavals. The South African Defence Force, naturally, played a central role within the total strategy in both its internal/external applications. The South African Defence Force was involved in the so-called Border War with Angola, via Namibia.<sup>37</sup> It was also responsible for cross-border raids against neighbouring states that housed or supported exiled groups, like the ANC, that launched armed attacks in South Africa. These controversial operations became known as destabilisation.<sup>38</sup> Due to the volatile situation, the army also played an internal role. Starting with 1984's Operation Palmiet (Napalm) soldiers would support the police in the townships throughout the decade. The army chiefs were averse to splitting their manpower and resources between the Border War and the internal situation (as well as having to work with the police). The township dwellers in general, ironically, had a much more positive experience with the disciplined and precise *military machine of apartheid* than they had with its policemen. Nonetheless, sending soldiers

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Publiekreg 2(2), November 1987, p. 197; W du Plessis & N Olivier, "10 Junie 1988 – derde algemene noodtoestand", *SA Publiekreg* 3(2), p. 19.

- 35 PW Botha. Private collection. ARCA: PV 203:4/2/144; A Prior, *South Africa politics* (Cape Town, 1982), p. 189; T Koppel & K Gibson, *Nightline – history in the making of television* (New York, 1996), p. 88; T Troups, "Riot – inside South Africa's burning townships", *Servamus*, November 1985, pp. 10-11; Coleman, pp. 54-55; S de Villiers, *Truth and Reconciliation Report 2* (Cape Town, 1998), pp. 261-262.
- 36 J-A Stemmet. Private collection. Interview with Magnus Malan, 12 August 2000; M Swilling (ed.), *Views on the South African state* (Pretoria, 1990), p. 90.
- 37 See: "Border War", *Journal for Contemporary History* – special edition 31(3), December 2006.
- 38 JPC Mostert (ed.), *Die Suid-Afrikaanse krisis – perspektiewe op die grondwetlike bestel* (Bloemfontein, 1986), p. 314; Pottinger, pp. 331-332.



into townships only blackened Pretoria's overall image further.<sup>39</sup> In between the traditional security layers the securocrats sneaked in a covert section. The Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) recruited individuals from among the ranks of soldiers and policemen, as well as captured and *turned* cadres from the freedom movement. The stealthy Bureau was responsible for frustrating the liberation movement, locally and outside South Africa, by spreading fear and paranoia through infiltration, disinformation, extortion, abduction, torture and killings. They were in many respects highly effective, but they were also exceptionally merciless.<sup>40</sup> Central to the success of the overall strategy, the government needed to be seen/accepted as the soundest option for the country. The state's approach to the violence and its role in it – amidst unremitting local and global media attention – frustrated such aspirations. From the strategists' perspective this formed part of the total onslaught's treacherous psychological component. Subsequently, through an extraordinary mass of censorship processes, the state tried to at first manage the flow of information, and later to nationalise it.<sup>41</sup> Controversial censorship, news in itself, further impaired the state's international stature and resulted in more pressure.

#### 4. POKING AT APOCALYPSE: THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE ANC'S STRATEGY

*Make apartheid unworkable and the country ungovernable*, the ANC's battle cry, penned by Thabo Mbeki and delivered by ANC President Oliver Tambo in 1984, summarised its strategy.<sup>42</sup> The ANC's master plan to seize power in South Africa took shape in the aftermath of the Soweto riots of 1976. This event represented a watershed in the organisation's history. Blacks had grown more enraged by apartheid than fearful of white power. The youth demonstrated unprecedented defiance and the regime's reaction to it sowed intense resentment in their parents, galvanising South Africa's majority.<sup>43</sup> Scores of blacks, especially the youth, joined the banned ANC while within the country the tense political atmosphere was fertile

39 J-A Stemmet, "Troops, townships and tribulations: Deployment of the South African Defence Force in the township unrest of the 1980s", *Journal for Contemporary History* 31(2), September 2006, pp. 178-193.

40 C Schutte & I Liebenberg (eds), *The hidden hand – covert operations in South Africa* (Pretoria, 1998), p. 80.

41 J-A Stemmet, "'Skimmespel van die waarsêers': Politieke sensuur in Suid-Afrika, c. 1980-1989. 'n Historiese perspektief", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe – spesiale uitgawe* 49(1), March 2009, pp. 85-97.

42 ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Oliver Tambo. Private collection. A 17.16: Box 17: Statement, 8 January 1984.

43 FA Du Preez, *Die rol van die African National Congress (ANC) as revolusionêre organisasie in die aanslag teen die Republiek van Suid-Afrika*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 1985, p. 112.

ground for exploitation. By its own accord, the Soweto riots had “created a situation which the ANC had not planned for”. The ANC was not organisationally geared for the influx of aspiring cadres nor strategically prepared for its sudden opportunities. The ANC’s National Executive Committee and the Revolutionary Council, as well as the exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) evaluated the existing structures and charged a commission with compiling recommendations. Structural changes were introduced in 1982.<sup>44</sup> Along with the organisational restructuring came a strategic overhaul as the executives concluded that, contrary to the thinking at its 1968 Morogoro Conference (Tanzania), the “stronger the political foundation, the stronger also will be the armed offensive”.<sup>45</sup> Like its enemy, the ANC studied revolutionary blueprints from history and, in 1978, sent a delegation to North Vietnam to consult with legendary Viet-Cong strategists General Vo Nguyen Giap and General Van Tien Dung. The Vietnamese underlined that waging a mere armed struggle against South Africa was futile. The ANC had to wage a *total war* – targeting the apartheid state at all spheres.<sup>46</sup> Planning and patience were the mantra that the famed strategists tried to instil in the representatives as revolution could only come about if the masses were mobilised and actively involved in a mass armed struggle. The strategy had layers and the people had to be guided and developed from one tier to the next. Rushing it would be fatal. The challenge was in sustaining mobilised participation.<sup>47</sup> A Politico Military Strategy Commission, consisting mostly of executives from the ANC’s military wing, had to formulate the newly acquired knowledge into a workable strategy. Thabo Mbeki persuaded the Commission that the strategy’s success lay in politics rather than in a naive military approach.<sup>48</sup> The plan, dubbed a *people’s war*, basically rested on four pillars: mass mobilisation; organisation of a political underground; armed struggle; internationalisation of the apartheid issue and isolation of the apartheid state. The ANC aimed at destroying, or at least decisively wearing down, the *status quo* and as such the regime’s overall authority to govern – while cementing itself as an *alternative power*. “We are able to use the combined strength of all forms of the struggle”, stated an ANC outline, “to crush the regime’s institutions and set up our own.”<sup>49</sup> It wanted to create and then fill a political power vacuum in South

44 ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare), ANC-Lusaka Mission. Box 75: Organizational Report.

45 *Ibid.*

46 AJ Venter (ed.), *Challenge South Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 282.

47 L de Beer, A political analysis of the African National Congress as an extra-parliamentary movement. Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 1990, p.134.

48 A Hadland & J Rantao, *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki* (Cape Town, 1999), p. 47.

49 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 6: “Broad guidelines on organs of people’s power.”

Africa. Within the majority, the ordinary masses, lay the ANC's key to success. Ordinary people would not unite behind abstract ideological philosophies though; activation and mobilisation would come from plain and simple demands. Vital to the strategy was that the ANC had to mobilise all possible demographics by organising them into steerable organisations. These groups would then unite into a single broad movement by concentrating their demands into basic claims, while not hesitating to use violence, on a massive scale, in furthering their demands.<sup>50</sup> Like the government's strategies the ANC's also polarised the population with a *for-us-or-against-us* ultimatum, stating explicitly: "There is no middle course."<sup>51</sup>

## 5. MAJORITY RULES: MASS MOBILISATION

To mobilise the mass's collective power in breaking down the regime's might, the exiled ANC needed to organise them – by proxy the United Democratic Front (UDF), effectively a multicultural organisational dome, under which as many as possible groups operated with being anti-apartheid as the only real criteria, would be the ANC's conduit. In "The constitutional proposals and the UDF," compiled by the ANC, it stated that its representatives in South Africa should not annex the entire executive of the UDF.<sup>52</sup> The UDF officially had to be an autonomous body so as to operate legally and gain maximum support from as many and diverse groupings as possible (without ideological differences or stringent alliance to the ANC hampering possible partnership).<sup>53</sup> Founded on 20 August 1983, with the support of more than 500 organisations, the UDF would be led by Rev. Allen Boesak, who immediately summarised the UDF's manifesto: "We want all our rights, we want them here, and we want them now."<sup>54</sup> By 1984 the UDF had 1 300 000 members, a sizeable financial foundation and a sophisticated organisational infrastructure. Throughout the decade the UDF would counter the regime with a myriad of socio-economic and political protests.<sup>55</sup> The UDF challenged the Tricameral Parliament's Indian and coloured elections and the elections for the black local councils. Although not stopping the regime from implementing it, the elections were a failure (17,5% of the coloured voters and 16,6% of Indians voted).<sup>56</sup> Translating demands into tangible pressure

50 W Booyse, "The united front strategy – the liberal dilemma", *Southern Africa Freedom Review* 2(4), 1989, pp. 33-45.

51 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 90: SA government, 1984-1986.

52 *Ibid.*, Box 75: "The constitutional proposals and the UDF" (1983).

53 *Ibid.*

54 J Seekings, *Heroes or villains? Youth politics in the 1980s* (Braamfontein, 1993), p. 1.

55 Oakes, p. 477; T Lodge, *Freedom in our lifetime: popular resistance politics in the 1950s and the 1980s*. Text of a college lecture, delivered at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, August 1986.

56 J Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa* (London, 1991), p. 276.

the UDF, backed by trade unions, struck repeatedly (and spectacularly) at the economy.<sup>57</sup> Although it commanded tremendous power nationally, the UDF – as an umbrella made up of affiliates – had little direct contact with the grassroots level.<sup>58</sup> Vital to the ANC's strategy was that its mass front, operating nationwide, should have tentacles stretching to the grassroots. *Alternative structures* on ground level would be planted by civic organisations. Street committees, self-defence units and people's courts, substituting the government's institutions, were overseen by street/block and area committees. The civic groups were attached to bigger organisations which included the UDF's regional bodies. Strategically this setup was to link the national with the regional and local drives.<sup>59</sup> The ANC wanted these alternative structures to oversee the "running of people's lives in a revolutionary way". Collectively it would form a "government for the whole of SA". In order to achieve that, the ANC wanted the people "to fight to get rid of the regime everywhere".<sup>60</sup> The ANC called on "our fighting youth" to act as torchbearers in countering the security forces (through self-defence units) and turning "every black area [into] a 'no-go area'" for them.<sup>61</sup> Emotional, naive and prone to radicalisation, the youth was easily mobilised and played a central role in administering the *alternative structures* including its *people's courts*.<sup>62</sup> *Collaborators*, blacks who were connected to the authorities such as black policemen, were judged at these trials and could receive the death sentence – executed in such a way that it served as a "deterrent" to others.<sup>63</sup> Consequently the infamous *necklace murders* became commonplace in South Africa. The UDF could not easily condemn violence perpetrated by its followers and could definitely not condemn violence that the ANC took credit for. UDF activists, speaking with a revolutionary tongue, increasingly encouraged the use of force without explicitly ordering brutality. As political violence sprawled across the country, the UDF became more flexible on the issue of popular violence

57 In October 1984, in reaction to the new Constitution, 800 000 workers at parastatal industries went on strike; in November 1984 about 400 000 pupils stayed away from classes. Massive strikes, stay-aways and boycotts would become a trademark of political protest in this decade. G Mbeki, *Sunset at midday* (Braamfontein, 1996), p. 62; Oakes, p. 481; J Seekings, *The UDF – a history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991* (Claremont, 2000), p. 128.

58 Seekings, p. 120.

59 Mbeki, p. 97; M Swilling (ed.), *Views on the South African state* (Pretoria, 1990), p. 41.

60 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 6: "Broad guidelines on organs of people's power."

61 ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare), Oliver Tambo. Private collection. Box 34: ANC call to the nation.

62 In reaction to the audaciousness of the youth, older traditionalists – backed by the security forces – formed cells (so-called *vigilante gangs*) that clashed violently with the youth groups. See: N Manganyi & A du Toit (eds), *Political violence and the struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1990); J Seekings. *The UDF* (Claremont, 2000).

63 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 6: "Broad guidelines on organs of people's power."

and its official stance of passive resistance.<sup>64</sup> The UDF's greatest success, as part of the bigger ANC strategy, might lie in that it succeeded in mobilising the masses and the momentum of volatile discontent that the ANC needed as a breeding ground for its own strategies and in isolating the minority power.<sup>65</sup>

## 6. SPEARING THE NATION: UMKHONTO WE SIZWE (MK) AND THE BUILDING OF AN UNDERGROUND

“Prospects of a bloodbath and the reduction of South Africa to a wasteland will not stop the struggle”, Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC, declared in 1986.<sup>66</sup> The 1970s provided the armed wing of the ANC with certain favourable conditions. During the mid-1970s some MK commanders, jailed in South Africa, were released. Angola and Mozambique gained independence from Portugal, opening up the possibility of setting up bases there. Following the Soweto riots scores of young blacks swarmed to the exiled organisation, wanting to be trained by MK.<sup>67</sup> From 1977 onwards newly trained cadres were smuggled into South Africa to focus on political work in the townships while assaults concentrated on armed propaganda in an attempt to scare whites and motivate the masses; civilian targets were out of bounds. Originally ANC strategy dictated, in the early 1980s, that for roughly three years, MK should focus on sabotage and thereafter an all-out uprising, the People's War, would certainly have commenced. During those three years cadres also had to recruit new members who had to stay within the country and help facilitate the People's War.<sup>68</sup> In the early 1980s the strategists decided that MK ought to stockpile weaponry in South Africa's neighbouring states. Cadres and weapons would be smuggled from there into the country, where they would stay to plan/execute operations and to create a support system for the next wave of cadres. Following an attack the cadres did not need to flee but simply dissolve into the townships where their communities would camouflage them.<sup>69</sup> The plan was seriously impeded by various factors, including the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev's Russia, the ANC's most important supplier of arms, balked at providing it with the military hardware necessary to intimidate the state's so-called military machine. Southern African states, in spite of propagandistic bombast, were unwilling to invite the wrath of

64 Seekings, p. 158; Swilling, p. 43; PW Botha. Private collection. ARCA: PV 203: PS 12/48/1, 1986.

65 Swilling, p. 44; Waldmeir, p. 49.

66 O Tambo, “Address of the President of the African National Congress”, *Survival* xxviii(6), November / December 1986, p. 547.

67 I Liebenberg & B Nel, *The long march the story of the struggle for liberation in SA* (Pretoria, 1993), p. 27.

68 *Ibid.*; S Ellis & T Sechaba, *Comrades against apartheid the ANC & the South African Communist Party in exile* (London, 1992), p. 101.

69 Ellis & Sechaba, p. 101.

Pretoria (see section on the SADF) and Mozambique and Pretoria's non-aggression Nkomati Accord torpedoed the ANC's snug base of attack. Furthermore there was the constant fear of state spies. The ever-harsher states of emergency further impeded the cementing of an underground. South Africa's topography also was not conducive to laying claim to areas as safe headquarters.<sup>70</sup> Frustration at not succeeding bred desperateness. Between 1978 and 1984 MK was responsible for 212 attacks, killing 48 people. On 20 May 1983 a car bomb outside the headquarters of the South African Air Force (SAAF) and Military Intelligence in Pretoria killed 19 people, injuring 200.<sup>71</sup> The number of civilian casualties would increase. "We believe that the time has come when those who stand in solid support of the race tyranny... must themselves begin to feel the agony of counter-blows", the ANC stated in 1985.<sup>72</sup> The argument's essence was: apartheid was held in place by the votes of ordinary citizens. Ultimately they were just as responsible for blacks' suffering as the security system. Therefore the civilian populace was a justified target.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, trying to open up borders for MK, the ANC demanded "a sustained drive to clear the white farms and harass the enemy with mine warfare".<sup>74</sup> In 1987 MK executed 200 attacks and in 1988 more than 262. Restaurants, shopping centres, grocery stores, car parks, amusement arcades, pubs and farms were included as targets killing/injuring civilians of all ages and races.<sup>75</sup> The soft targets blemished the ANC's international image as noble freedom fighters and, from its perspective, justified the regime's draconian measures, while doing very little to change the *status quo*. With an average budget, in the 1980s, of anywhere between \$8 million and \$25 million, MK tried to topple a harsh regime that spent about \$2,8 billion on its army alone. Between July 1985 and June 1986 MK operations killed 54 persons – losing 489 cadres in the process.<sup>76</sup> Due to South Africa's clampdown on neighbouring states that housed ANC bases and also negotiations on the Bush War (causing the Angolans to expel the ANC) by the end of the decade, MK was, physically, further removed from its target than in 1976.<sup>77</sup>

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70 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

71 Anon., "The ANC in perspective", *Servamus*, July 1984, pp. 10-13.

72 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 5: ANC National Consultation Conference, 1985.

73 In the same way as the regime could not promote radical action by the security forces only to later discipline them for it, the ANC struggled to clearly state what cadres were to target.

74 ANC-Lusaka Mission. ANC Archives (Fort Hare University, Fort Hare). Box 5: ANC National Consultation Conference, 1985.

75 C Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1987/88* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 611.

76 J Herbst, "Prospects for revolution in South Africa", *Political Science Quarterly* 103(4), 1988-1989, p. 680.

77 Ellis & Sechaba, p. 124.

## 7. AND THE WORLD WEPT: INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE APARTHEID ISSUE

Although the Botha government was under unprecedented anti-apartheid pressure, how much of that was a direct result of the ANC's initiatives, is unsure. Apartheid had been controversial since its 1948 inception. Arguably the ANC's biggest propagandist was the regime itself. The latter's security crackdowns and its defiant attitude towards friends and foes alike, ensured international interest and pressure. The Botha regime could attempt to explain its actions – but trying to justify apartheid was futile. As long as apartheid existed, in the eyes of the world, the ANC's cause would be moral and just (largely irrespective of its methods). Everything that weakened the government's position per implication furthered the ANC's goals. Although being anti-apartheid did not automatically imply being pro-ANC, as was the case with the UDF, all the organisation was striving for was severe pressure on the regime. Irrespective of its relationship with the ANC, the implementers of anti-apartheid boycotts, sanctions and disinvestment furthered the strategic goals of the ANC.<sup>78</sup>

## 8. CONCLUSION

"I am not prepared to make it, not now and not tomorrow", PW Botha said about a possible statement of intent or timeline for the complete dismantling of apartheid.<sup>79</sup> Basically the same reason why whites had accepted the Nationalists' reforms, the blacks, and the outside world, had rejected it as *fool's gold*. As long as minority rule was maintained – irrespective of its guise – there would not be a permanent solution. The bettering of apartheid was irrelevant as long as the majority demanded the utter eradication thereof. After visiting South Africa in 1981 the reformist specialist, Samuel Huntington, returned in 1986 to review Pretoria's five year reform track record. His conclusions stayed relevant for the rest of the decade. The American blamed the National Party for raising expectations to an inappropriate level. According to Huntington, reforms could only be effective if a so-called Fabian strategy was followed whereby reforms were introduced as quickly as possibly – catching resistance groups off guard. Too much time was lapsing between the announcement and implementation of reforms for it to be really effective. "No government is happy about introducing reforms under pressure, and seeming to give it", stated Huntington and implied that the regime's approach to reforms

78 See J-A Stemmet, "Botha's Babylon and the big brawl: Reflections on the way that the regime of PW Botha viewed the international anti-apartheid campaign", *Journal for Contemporary History* 30(3), December 2005, pp. 16-35.

79 PW Botha. Private collection. ARCA: PV 203: 4/2/133.



ensured that it had lost the element of surprise. He expected that there would be violence, but that it was imperative for a government to keep it under control; the South African regime was seen as taking part in or at least encouraging “backlash violence”. In 1981 he recommended to the government that it must, at all costs, broaden its support base but found five years later that the regime had “actually alienated” ideal groups and had failed to “rally new coalition partners”. The Botha government had lost and was continuing to lose “authority, respect and legitimacy of major groups in South African society”. Security issues, by the latter part of the decade, had overshadowed reforms. Summing up accurately, he said: “South Africa today has a government too weak to impose reform from above assuming it wanted to – and opposition groups which are too weak to compel reform from below through negotiation.”<sup>80</sup> Its reform strategy as well as its security strategy were weakening its power base and chipping away at its legitimacy, both in the eyes of the majority of blacks as well as the international community. Prospects of securing a type of lasting socio-economic stability – not to mention prosperity – was increasingly dwindling. By the end of the decade the ANC had some important advantages. It had won the battle for the hearts and minds of the masses. Through mass mobilisation the ANC succeeded in politically empowering the masses, albeit only outside of Parliament. It successfully utilised and exploited the combined economic strength of the masses as a potent political weapon. It successfully exploited and channelled the frustration of the masses into active mass violence. Combining these advantages with the armed struggle and the worldwide pressure on the regime, the ANC succeeded in launching an unprecedented onslaught against the minority establishment. Nonetheless the ANC failed in coming close to toppling the regime. The regime’s military-security complex was too vast and too rash for the ANC to substantially threaten minority power by such means. Although the ANC did turn townships into violent chaos, the government succeeded in stemming it from engulfing the entire country. The regime prevented the sought-after ungovernableness to close in on the actual centres of power. Essentially the ANC’s strategy, with the qualified exception of the armed struggle, failed to effect any tangible physical disruption of white society. The regime prevented the ANC from unilaterally seizing power. The ANC prevented the government from unilaterally imposing its concept of a New South Africa. The successes and failures of both the ANC and Nationalist government had forged a stalemate which no group could unilaterally break through, as such setting the table for negotiations.

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80 S Huntington, “Whatever has gone wrong with reform?”, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (8), Winter, 1986, pp. 19-22.