

Judging the New South Africa

Mary Marshall Clark

It is hard to imagine the vibrancy and potential of a new democracy like South Africa without talking to the people who helped make it and witnessing first-hand the social problems and social changes it was created to address. I was fortunate enough to have such an experience in the summer of 1999 on a trip I made to South Africa to interview key leaders in the anti-apartheid struggle. Nothing I had read about South African history, or seen in documentary films and interviews, prepared me for the palpable excitement of being there and speaking directly with people who had spent most of their lives working for the political change that came in 1994. Coming from the older democracy of the United States, where apathy and even cynicism have too often replaced the collective memory of struggle, I was struck by the energy and spunk South Africans applied to seemingly intractable problems. Having not witnessed the equivalent of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in my own society, I was unprepared for the deep engagement with issues of race, equality, and class struggle I found in everyday conversations, the media, and at the highest levels of government and the court. I found in my interviews with anti-apartheid leaders

that they too were often amazed that the “change” had come in their lifetimes. South Africa did the impossible. It faced its enemy—apartheid—and defeated it. Now, under the leadership of the ANC, South Africa has begun to address the complex legacy of social and economic problems that apartheid left in its wake.

It is no surprise, five years after the beginning of the rule of the African National Congress (ANC), that intellectuals and critics are judging South Africa against the backdrop of the euphoria in which the new government was created. The elections of 1994 that ended over 350 years of domination by white rule captured the imagination of the world; and the conclusion of 46 years of official apartheid was celebrated as a universal victory for democracy. Not only had the world witnessed a “bloodless revolution,” millions of South Africans who had languished in poverty and despair saw the first glimmers of real hope that they would have access to food, water, employment, social services, and land they had been deprived of in a country where the rule of law now extended to every citizen. Optimism rightfully replaced despair as South Africa cast its struggle as a test case for democracy among other liberation struggles.

Four of the essayists in this volume deliberately evaluate the ANC's policies and programs at the five-year mark, pointing to the need for a careful analysis of economic, political, and social policies in light of contemporary realities South Africa faces at home and in the world today. They reveal both the diversity of opinion on South Africa and the multiple criteria needed to judge the ANC's leadership fairly, reminding us with their forcefulness that criticism is most useful when victory is still fresh. The question is, how quickly should judgments be rendered, and to what specific claims and controversies should they apply?

The degree to which apartheid's legacy is still active in South Africa is vividly described by the sociologist Martin J. Murray. In this critical but fair review of the contemporary state of South Africa affairs, "The New Winners and New Losers in South Africa After Apartheid," Murray pronounces that ANC rule has hardly begun to heal the wounds developed over centuries of *de facto* apartheid. South Africa, he writes dramatically, is still two nations, "one prosperous, comfortable, and predominantly but not exclusively white, and the other impoverished, fragmented, and overwhelmingly black." Drawing our attention to carefully compiled statistics, Murray lets the numbers do the talking as he illustrates how closely the historic conditions of apartheid still define the dimensions of everyday life. His courtroom-like evocation of the social inequities of apartheid is so skillful that one wonders how just five years of ANC rule could alter much.

Yet Murray pulls no punches as he concludes, harshly and quickly, that there is absolutely no room in the new South Africa for what he calls "an organic compromise between the entrenched white oligarchy and an emergent yet restive black middle class." Reminding us that 5 percent of the population still owns almost 85 percent of the country's

wealth, Murray warns against a collusion of old and new elites. Basically, Murray argues that the kind of neoliberal economics being played out in South Africa has an aggressive capitalist vision at its core in which race is still a powerful dividing line. He notes, rather impressively, along these lines that Afrikaner control of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange has risen dramatically over the past twenty years, culminating in a surge to 32 percent in 1998.

The losers in the new South Africa are, predictably, the same cast of characters. Citing few gains in the labor movement in the new global economy, Murray suggests that the fragmentation of the labor market that began in the 1970s has continued unabated. Paradoxically, the effects of relaxing apartheid-era influx controls and the impact of globalization on labor practices, combined with high levels of immigration and a determined population increase, makes the situation worse. Freedom and the end of economic isolation have brought more problems than solutions, at least temporarily, suggests Murray. With 40 percent of its urban populace unemployed and nearly 11.5 million near the poverty datum line in rural areas, South Africa is in a state of crisis that cannot be averted.

Murray leaves us with questions, but no answers. The absence of any constructive suggestions about how to proceed reminds us that there has been no real articulation of a program for reconstruction and development by the ANC since the early days of Mandela. Although Mandela's government provided limited redress for a few years, Murray concludes that the startling negative statistics on poverty and inequality in contemporary South Africa require a new plan for the development of an infrastructure and the distribution of resources.

Although Murray concludes that economic solvency will be a major criterion for judging

the success of democracy in new South Africa, Grant Farred reminds us that race and ethnicity remain central issues in a society that has chosen to characterize itself as non-racial. In his article, "Better the Devil You Know? The Politics of Colouredness and Post-Apartheid South African Elections in the Western Cape," Farred suggests that the failure of the ANC to capture a significant majority of the coloured vote in the Cape Flats in the elections of 1994 and 1999 is worth careful analysis. The so-called coloureds, whom Farred refers to as "disjunctively black," enjoyed a limited franchise under the apartheid system in the province of South Africa that is viewed as the last stronghold of the National Party (NP). Although it might not be surprising that the coloureds cast their lot with the NP in 1994 elections, given that they were fearful of losing their toehold in a region where whites were allowed to retain their economic interests under the power-sharing agreements of the Government of National Unity (GNU), Farred suggests a continued alliance with white constituencies in 1999 is troubling if not anomalous in South African politics. Although on the one hand it is not historically surprising that coloureds, at the top of the color-caste system under apartheid, voted for old alliances rather than new ones in 1994, Farred argues that only coloured racism explains the absence of a strong pro-ANC vote in 1999.

In a refreshingly nonreductionistic analysis of 1999 election statistics, Farred points to interesting new splits in the coloured vote between the old alliance with the NP (now the New National Party [NNP]) and a growing alliance with the supposedly liberal, mostly white, Democratic Party (DP). These splits, perhaps more anomalous than the vote of five years earlier, follow class lines as closely as they do ideological fissures. Most striking, there is a new drift in the suburban middle

class away from NNP politics, toward the reconstituted DP, which won 11.9 percent of the coloured vote in 1999 as opposed to 4 percent in 1994. Although the traditional Afrikaner base of the NNP continues to draw the working-class vote in the black townships, Farred suggests that the elite English character of the DP has lured a small but significant portion of the middle-class coloured vote away from the ANC, signaling a desire to move beyond racial binaries (and perhaps the notion of color-based identity itself) in post-apartheid South Africa. Ironically, Farred claims, voting against color in a regionally based battle has propelled the constituency of the Western Cape into a nationalist discourse in which race is a central feature. For the coloureds, argues Farred, are voting out of fear of political extinction. This fear, he contends, is born of a partially submerged orientalist fantasy that black rule will bring chaos and ineptitude. This fantasy, of course, can be clearly traced to its white Afrikaner roots.

Farred makes a less strong case for self-deception on the part of the coloured electorate as he analyses new alliances with the mostly anglican DP, historically the "softer" version of imperialism, and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP, which won 2.8 percent of the 1999 coloured vote). For although this vote may seem anomalous given the easy majority the ANC assumed nationally in 1994 and 1999, it is not ideologically distinct from the promise of a non-racial democracy in which the rule of law guarantees basic civil liberties—including the right to vote individual alliances. Moreover, there may be other factors that can explain the failure of the ANC to capture the initiative in the Western Cape in the crucial years between 1994 and 1999—including the tragic crisis of leadership within its own ranks in the Cape Flats region during that period.

Farred is quite right in arguing that the fields of power that have motivated racist divisions in South Africa still exist in the new democracy. But even if the coloured middle class is voting primarily out of fear, something that is tricky to discern in only two elections, one could argue that the exercise of choice in a democracy builds civil society in the long run even when unwise choices are made in the short run. What is more worrisome in the Western Cape, particularly given the historic ability of the Afrikaner party to stir up working-class fears across ideological lines, is the fact that the NNP has retained its egregious power in impoverished black townships and continues to attract new support from the historically progressive labor movement.

Anthony Marx, in a masterful analysis of the rapidly evolving South African situation, "The Ongoing Contestation over Nationhood," suggests that we cannot interpret contemporary conflicts over national unity without knowing about the accommodations of the past. For Marx, it is critically important that we understand that white racism bridged Afrikaner and British nationalisms (until the NP gained absolute control) and forged a common loyalty to the state. Equally important, Marx argues, we must understand that what often bound together extremely disparate forms of black protest (the Communist Party, socialism, Pan-Africanism, the Black Consciousness movement, the left-wing labor movement, etc.) was a common desire to resist the state. Without understanding these dynamics, he suggests, we cannot interpret the complex relationships represented in the spectrum of nonracial unity that the ANC has projected as its national identity. ANC unity may be more easily forged in protest, implies Marx, than in the project of reconstituting the state under a new set of guidelines and expectations.

One of the problems, of course, is that the "practical democracy" that Mandela prom-

ised held out something for everyone, and under the power-sharing agreements of the GNU many of the hardest decisions about how to negotiate the power of the new state were forestalled. But as others in this volume point out, and Marx underscores, many of these unresolved tensions are now revealing themselves in economic issues that have no readily apparent solution. Economic growth is not what was expected despite a conciliation with domestic and international capital, and limited efforts at redress have worsened the overall economic situation according to short-term analysis. But one of the greatest challenges, Marx implies, is that there is no consensus on next steps. Although left-leaning members of the ANC would like to see Thabo Mbeki make a sharp turn toward a policy of redistribution of wealth, whites and business interests plead for less interference, says Marx. Both sides are nervous since Mbeki, while encouraging economic growth at home and abroad, simultaneously claims loyalty to the dream of an African Renaissance—which calls for economic independence. There is a fantasy in this, Marx implies, that the needs of all parties can be met if the politics of appeasement are practiced well enough.

Hard thinking on South Africa suggests, however, Marx concludes, that the time has come for Mbeki and other ANC leadership to make some definitive choices despite the difficulties. The decisions are in part between what Marx refers to, and Farred alluded to, as harder and softer forms of nationalism and populism. Zimbabwe and Brazil, Marx suggests, are two possible directions we might watch for given the similarities of a population in which there is a First World minority and a Third World majority. Although neither of these scenarios is appealing, there is no doubt that South Africa faces a major challenge as one of the richest countries in Africa and one that re-

tains one of the highest ratios of economic inequality in the world.

In contrast to Marx, who points to the near impossibility of South Africa achieving economic independence in a global economy, Moeletsi Mbeki (Thabo Mbeki's brother) suggests a major criterion for evaluating South Africa will be its ability to lead the rest of Africa towards autonomy in the African Renaissance. In his essay, "Issues in South African Foreign Policy: The African Renaissance," Moeletsi Mbeki begins by crediting the current South African president with helping to define the political rhetoric surrounding the Renaissance and calling for South Africa to play a specific role in Africa's renewal. Suggesting that Thabo Mbeki has implicitly promised that South African foreign policy should be directed at the common interests of Africa as a whole, the author concludes that South Africa has in fact often acted against the interests of other African nations. Citing as examples South Africa's failure to join COMESA, its call for an economic boycott of Nigeria in the wake of political violence against its rebels, its temporary alliance with Taiwan, and its ongoing relations with the United States, Moeletsi Mbeki warns that South Africa's policies are actually running counter to the rest of Africa's interests. At best, Mbeki implies, South Africa is practicing a politics of naïveté; at worst, it has sold out the idea of the Renaissance to Western superpowers who do not have South Africa's own independence at heart.

Are these criticisms justified? Moeletsi Mbeki wrestles with himself about how harshly to judge Thabo Mbeki's South Africa, and how quickly. In the end, he concludes that South Africa is ill-informed about the realities of postcolonial Africa, as the fledgling democracy has just entered into its own era of independence: "I do not get the impression that our government leaders and our diplomats have really begun to make the effort to

understand the character of the social structures that are now in place in African countries and how these affect Africa's possible revival in the post-Cold War environment." With this statement, Moeletsi Mbeki offers his brother more time, and the essay reads as a note of caution instead of a final assessment. Yet the reader is left with the impression that Moeletsi Mbeki is pulling his punches as he concludes dramatically that South Africa cannot play a leadership role in the African Renaissance until and unless it cuts its umbilical cord to the West.

Moeletsi Mbeki's most cogent criticism, although not well drawn, is that South Africa has diminished the power of its own nationhood through the sale of state corporations to foreigners, handing over the management of African economic resources to non-Africans.

It is apparent in these four essays that the standards by which the new South Africa is being judged are complex, if not often contradictory. Marx, perhaps more than any of the other essayists, makes it clear that there is no single criterion by which to judge South Africa at the five-year mark, simply because much of its identity is yet to be forged. This should come as no surprise, since the first half decade of ANC rule was brilliantly scripted by Mandela as a negotiated compromise between the old and the new. Without that script, there would not have been the peaceful transition that the world has celebrated as unique and victorious. But many deep issues were left unsettled that are revealing themselves in economic terms. Among them, as authors in this volume and elsewhere have pointed out, are the development of a civil society and a solid electorate in a country with single-party rule, the negotiation of representation in regions where a system of proportional representation has not been worked out, the distribution of resources where no infrastructure exists, the establishment of the lim-

its of constitutional power within society and government, and the project of sustaining unity in a party where resistance was defined by opposition to state power.

The criteria for a successful development of democracy in South Africa are equally complex. They include, as has been suggested, black unity domestically and regionally; nonracial cooperation across class lines; economic solvency in the world market and economic integrity at home; and, perhaps most important, the freedom to form a new national identity in a country that has witnessed some of the most pernicious racist ideologies the world has ever known.

What is the timeline for the new South Africa to address this ambitious set of issues and satisfy the critiques of its advocates and allies? Although the need for change is imminent, particularly given the promises of the ANC to address the extreme suffering of nearly one-third of the people, it is clear that a mixture of long-term and short-term strategies are necessary to secure the practical democracy Mandela promised. The degree to which race, class, and ideology are still contested in much older democratic societies, including the United States, serves to remind us that deeply embedded problems require far-reaching solutions. And as we wait for economic

and social revolutions to match the political one, it is important to remember that South Africa has already taught us that miracles are made the hard way—not handed down.

Moreover, it must be remembered that South Africa's "bloodless revolution" was also a carefully negotiated settlement and that the GNU, a transitional government, was in power until June 16, 1999. In a very real sense then, it is only now that the ANC policies and programs critiqued in this volume can really be judged as independent indications of the kind of democracy South Africa will eventually become.

In conclusion, South Africa is a compelling case study for democracy, in part because so many of the historical problems of the twentieth century are revealed there. If South Africa succeeds in addressing the complex intersection of issues it faces, then the world will be more prepared to struggle with issues of racism, sexism, nationalism, globalization, immigration, migration, underdevelopment, ecological devastation, and more. Although it is appropriate to question when and how solutions to these problems will be found, if history is any lesson it is unlikely that South Africans will shrink from the task—no matter how improbable the victory is judged to be.