

Peaceful Struggle Is Futile

By Thabo Mbeki

LUSAKA, Zambia — The agenda for change in South Africa is no longer being decided in the White House, 10 Downing Street, Elysée Palace or the Union Building in Pretoria. It is being decided in the townships of South Africa and among the voters of the Western countries.

This poses a considerable dilemma for the policy-makers of the West, who still cling to the illusion that there is an evolutionary answer to the South African problem.

Accustomed to treating the South African regime as a legitimate Government, the leaders of the West are now obliged to consider using the kind of measures that are normally reserved for what they consider pariah states. The policy-makers prefer, however, to avoid facing the embarrassing truth — that South Africa is precisely such a state.

Thus, it is possible for President Reagan to denounce all manner of countries for their "violations of human rights." Yet he breathes not a word about the horrors of the apartheid system. Some time later, the same President produces a list of "terrorist states." Yet the Republic of South Africa is absent from the list. Washington apparently chooses to ignore the commando team that Pretoria sent into Angola to blow up American-owned oil installations and kill American personnel working in the oil fields.

The amazing thing is that those Western leaders who propagate and support these preposterous positions argue that they do so in defense of freedom, justice and democracy. Boiled down to its essence, their argument is that the people of South Africa are better off with the devil of racism that they know than the scourge of Communism — and the experts in Washington are quite convinced that Communism will descend on the hapless peoples of southern Africa once the democratic majority takes power there.

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Thus, the defense of the most virulent and pernicious racism in the contemporary world is disguised as a far-sighted and principled promotion of freedom, justice and democracy. And in the meantime, the democratization of South Africa is firmly — and deliberately — obstructed.

The problem arises when the South African regime acts in a manner that clearly reveals its abhorrent and unacceptable nature. What must the Western policy-makers do when the people of South Africa rise up and are killed because they proclaim freedom, justice and democracy and denounce a racist order? The problem is compounded when those whom the experts are supposed to represent — in this case, the American people — also stand up and call for an end to the white minority domination in South Africa.

When this happens, the policy-makers must make an effort to catch up with their constituencies — to appear, at least, to appease and respond

The future will be decided in the streets and among Western voters

to the demands of the overwhelming majority of the people of South Africa. At the same time, however, they are determined not to treat the racist rulers of South Africa as a regime of outlaws.

Out of this compound of irreconcilables emerges a two-pronged strategy. First, the black people of South Africa — African, colored and Indian — are fed on a diet of words expressing hostility to apartheid. Our ears tingle to the thunderous announcements of actions taken or about to be taken against Pretoria. In fact, however, the actions are designed to have the minimum possible impact on the apartheid system and on those who enforce it.

What's incredible is that when we blacks speak out against such pusillanimity, we are reassured that it is really for our own good: after all, we are told, if a boulder were to fall on

President P. W. Botha's head, we, the oppressed, would be hurt more than he would.

The second prong of this strategy is to do everything possible to insure that President Botha does not get hurt, and to reassure him whenever possible that the major Western governments will do nothing to hurt him. Sometimes these reassurances come as sheep dressed in wolfish clothes, measures described as sanctions but designed not to have any impact at all.

Clearly this strategy is indefensible. Those who have elaborated it, including the American and British Governments, know this, but they try to disguise it by holding out the promise of an evolutionary solution.

The problem is that an evolutionary process is predicated on the quiescence of the oppressed, a quiescence imposed and maintained by the oppressor. It is that relationship between oppressor and oppressed — a relationship perfectly embodied in the brutal state of emergency declared last month — that allows the Botha regime to argue that the people of South Africa either accept the status quo or would be satisfied by any meaningless "reform program" that the racists choose to implement. It is, however, precisely this relationship that we blacks are challenging.

The question that President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain have yet to answer is this: If there is no pressure for change, why should President Botha and the rest of white South Africa initiate change?

It will not do to argue that our struggle inside South Africa is permissible only if it is peaceful. The teacher Matthew Goniwe, the lawyer Victoria Mxenge and many others have been murdered for their involvement in a peaceful struggle. Thirty-eight of their colleagues in the leadership of the United Democratic Front are facing treason charges for no reason other than that they encouraged South Africans to unite in a peaceful struggle for a democratic South Africa.

We will emerge victorious in this struggle — however many people we lose in the process. We still call for meaningful sanctions to minimize that loss of life. We rely on the voters to whom even such people as President Reagan owe their positions to insure that the West participates in bringing about a democratic South Africa.

The Western governments cannot continue to help perpetuate apartheid. The millions of antiracist voters who elected them must oblige their governments to impose sanctions. □