

SOUTH AFRICA : ALTERNATIVES TO DISASTER
The Role of Non-White Political Organisations

The population of the Union of South Africa is made up of approximately 3 million whites and rather more than 10 million non-whites (approximately 9 million Africans, nearly half a million Asians, chiefly Indians and a million and a quarter Coloureds (i.e. persons of mixed white and non-white descent). All these sections of the population have lived together for generations in this fair land with its gold, diamonds, iron and coal deposits and its pleasant climatic conditions, and have by their joint efforts built up a civilization which by western standards compares more than favourably with anything to be found in any other part of the continent of Africa.

But although they have lived together in South Africa for so long - the Africans as indigenous inhabitants of the country, the whites for over 300 years, the Coloureds since black and white made contact and the Asians for nearly 100 years - they have so far failed to work out a way of life which will guarantee the fundamental human rights of all sections of the population. Indeed the recent history of the country points the other way.

The ruling section of the country consists of the whites who may roughly be divided into English-speaking South Africans (40% of the white population) and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans (60% of the white population). The Afrikaners (whose language Afrikaans is a local form of Dutch) have been in the saddle since 1948 when they arrested political power from the United Party then led by the late Field-Marshal Smuts. Since that time they have been giving effect to what they call the policy of apartheid or separate development. A large number of legislative measures have been put on the statute book and practical steps have been taken in various aspects of South African national life to translate apartheid into reality.

Among the measures which have been passed is the Population Registration Act, popularly known as the Stud Book Act in terms of which the racial groups are to be sorted out and classified to obviate any difficulty which might arise in the matter of deciding who is white and who is non-white. Another is the Mixed Marriages Act, the so-called Immorality Act, which outlaws both marriages & illicit sexual relations between white and non-white. The Bantu Education Act has put into operation a system of education for Africans designed to ensure that they do not 'rise above certain forms of labour'. The Group Areas Act deprives non-whites, without adequate compensation, of property rights which they have legally acquired and enjoyed for generations. In recent months apartheid has made inroads into spheres of life formerly regarded as beyond the reach of governmental control. Under the Native Laws Amendment Act, in terms of the notorious 'church' clause, the worshipping together of white and non-white is made subject to ministerial control and secular mixed gatherings are made equally subject to government bans and Dr. Verwoed has threatened to put them down with an iron hand. The autonomy of the universities which has been jealously guarded for many years has been shattered by the adoption in principle of the Separate University Education Bill designed to close the so-called 'open' universities to non-white students and to open tribal universities for the latter.

Whichever way one looks at it and in every sphere of life under the inexorable march of the policy of apartheid, doors previously opened are being closed and doors hitherto closed are being barred and bolted and the different sections of the population are being called upon to live in water-tight compartments to be opened occasionally on the arbitrary say-so of some government official or other.

What has been the reaction of the non-white political organisations to this erecting of impenetrable barriers between different sections of the population?

The principal non-white organisations operating in South Africa are the African National Congress (A.N.C.) founded in 1912 and working mainly among Africans; the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) founded by Mahatma Gandhi and looking particularly after the special needs of the Indian community, a small community (less than half a million) which has made a contribution to the development of the country, especially in the province of Natal, out of all proportion to their numbers; the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation (SACPO) which caters for the million Coloureds who are concentrated mainly in the western area of the Cape Province and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) a newly established co-ordinating body which seeks to bring together workers' organisations on a non-racial basis, with non-white workers in the majority.

Although these organisations from the point of view of membership cater for different groups, they have in recent years developed a system of such close collaboration on matters of common interest that they have come to be regarded as "the Congress Movement". Both on the national and the provincial level they have consultative committees for the discussion of proposed schemes and campaigns, and while each body retains its independence of policy and action, over the years this co-operation has led to increasing awareness of their mutual problems and to the development of a common mind on the main issues confronting non-white groups in South Africa.

These organisations have consistently opposed the policy of apartheid and have sought to demonstrate how each apartheid measure in the last analysis undermines the harmonious relations that ought to exist between nationals of a common country and exacerbates the feelings of bitterness, frustration and hostility which it is the principal business of any responsible government to allay rather than to aggravate. Owing to the fact that there is such wide agreement between the ruling Nationalist Party and the main opposition party - the United Party - on matters of non-white policy, the non-white political organisations have emerged as the chief opposition to the racialist policies of the South African Government. Although they have no effective representation in Parliament and are therefore compelled to carry on their struggle against apartheid outside the governing bodies of the country, the Government recognises that the non-white political organisations constitute the only opposition to its racist intentions and practices. For that reason the Government is directing its machinery both legislative and administrative against silencing, if it can, the non-white political organisations. Hence regulations have been adopted to exercise rigid control over the meetings of non-white organisations; members of the Security Branch of the South African Police attend their meetings and take notes; the homes and offices of leaders of these organisations are kept under constant surveillance and are occasionally raided for the seizure of documents which might be used in evidence against them; their phones are tapped and secret tape-recordings are made by members of the Security Branch of proceedings at their meetings, and generally steps are taken to intimidate leaders and ordinary members of these organisations in the hope that they will cease to be active in their opposition to the Government. As is now common knowledge these steps have ultimately culminated in the arrest of 156 leaders of the "Congresses" as they have been called by the Crown, on allegations of Treason and the relevant preparatory examination has been in process for the last ten months. Present indications are that these proceedings will continue through the whole of 1958 and possibly extend into 1959. Meantime the persons involved are by court order debarred from attending or addressing meetings of the organisations to which they belong. But the non-white organisations have not been merely negative in their opposition to the Government, but have put forward positive alternative proposals to the policy of apartheid. They

take their stand on the policy of inter-racial harmony through practical co-operation and contact. Their interpretation of South African history is to the effect that this country has become what it is as a result of the joint efforts of black and white. They are therefore resolutely opposed to any policy which seeks to deny any section of the population the benefit, if any, of the result of such co-operation, past and present. They reject the idea that South Africa is either a white man's country or a black man's country. In this respect South Africa differs from other territories in Africa such as the Gold Coast or Nigeria or even Uganda where the black man outnumbers the white man to such an extent that it is ridiculous to talk about the country being anything other than a black man's country. In South Africa in addition to the African we have settled here significant numbers of other groups - Europeans, Asians & Coloured - and therefore the country must frankly be recognised as a multi-racial country with all that that implies.

In the view of the non-white organisations this implies that no one group should be allowed to occupy a position of domination over other groups. The equal rights of all sections of the population must be made the basis of national policy. Only to the extent that any particular section recognises that its rights are safeguarded under our national policy will it be prepared to acknowledge and work for the similar rights of other sections of the population. Under the policy of apartheid, however, the country is regarded as a white man's country with the other sections of the population expected to be satisfied with such crumbs as may fall from the white man's table. Indeed the insidious effects of this policy may be seen in the fact that it goes so far as to discriminate even between white and white, so that the Afrikaner section of the population, especially those who subscribe to the policy of the Nationalist Party, constitute a kind of white elite whose rights take precedence over those who are not fortunate enough to belong to that group.

In this the non-white groups see nothing but a temporary primrose path for the minority which will lead to ultimate disaster for the country as a whole. For no people - neither the English-speaking South Africans nor the non-white South Africans - can be expected to acquiesce in a situation in which their rights shall for ever be determined for them by one section of the population. Every people claims the right to have say in the shaping of its destiny. The policy of apartheid explicitly denies non-white groups the right of self-determination.

But signs are not wanting to show that the message of interracial co-operation on a basis of equal rights to which the non-white political organisations are irrevocably committed must eventually be heeded.

More and more thinking people in South Africa are coming to recognise that the apartheid way is the way of ultimate disaster for South Africa and that in order to prevent that dreadful day ever dawning, steps need to be taken to bring together people of different shades of opinion and different racial and cultural background who are interested in the future welfare of South Africa to see if they cannot devise an alternative or alternatives to apartheid. It was under the impulse of this spirit that the "Congresses" organised and held in June 1955 the "Congress of the People" which brought together people from all racial groups and from all walks of life and which produced "the Freedom Charter" a document in which those in attendance expressed their hopes and aspirations for the South Africa of the future. The Freedom Charter has received wide endorsement among both white and non-white groups and individuals. Similarly the Inter-Denominational African Ministers' Federation, an organisation which brings African clergymen from the majority of the African churches operating in South Africa, convened a Conference of African leaders in Bloemfontein in 1956 to discuss the Report of the Tomlinson Commission, a commission which had in its report produced

the apartheid blueprint for the so-called "Bantu Areas". In rejecting the Report of the Tomlinson Commission the Bloemfontein Conference produced a Declaration which called for a fresh effort to be made to bring together leaders of the different sections of the population to search for a solution of our national problems in a different direction from the barren road of apartheid. There has been an encouraging response to the call of the African Ministers' Federation and a Multi-Racial Conference along the lines suggested by them will be held in Johannesburg from December 3 to 5, 1957. Prominent South Africans from different walks of life such as Bishop Ambrose Reeves of Johannesburg, Alan Paton, the famous author, Chief Albert John Lutuli, President-General of the African National Congress - clergymen, businessmen, university professors, social workers, trade unionists, leaders of political parties like the Labour Party and the Liberal Party, etc - have agreed to sponsor the conference, recognising it as they do as another chance to endeavour to avert the disaster that seems to be looming ahead of South Africa. It would probably be regarded as alarmist to say that there can be no alternative to a clash of colour in South Africa. On the other hand it would be criminal self-complacency to disregard the signs of the times which indicate that there is not much time left for men and women of goodwill on both sides of the colour line to come together to save South Africa for its inhabitants in particular and for the world in general. It is to be hoped that common sense may yet prevail and this fair land saved from race riots, bloodshed and the other bitter fruits of racial discrimination.