

Beating The Bans

November's launch of the latest alternative South African newspaper, coming as it does hard on the heels of the closure of a fellow independent weekly, seems to point to a headstrong, even foolhardy, determination to find the cracks in PW Botha's armour of press law.

The *Vrye Weekblad* (*Independent Weekly*), the first Afrikaans newspaper to declare its commitment to 'a non-racial, democratic and united South Africa', seeks to attract the readership of those swelling numbers of Afrikaners it believes are losing faith in their apartheid government.

If it succeeds, it could complement the Johannesburg-based *Weekly Mail*, which is largely targeted at the English speaking, liberal to left market. But the odds are stacked against it; white Afrikaners have displayed a determined shift to the right in recent local elections, and the *Weekly Mail* was recently banned for four weeks.

The *Vrye Weekblad*, and other alternative newspapers like it, are ranged against a government that has the power to ban any publication for up to three months if, in the opinion of the relevant government minister, it promotes organisations like the outlawed African National Congress, or if it encourages what he believes is 'subversive activity' - including civil disobedience, strikes or general disorder. Discretion lies entirely with the minister, and he is obliged only to serve two warning notices prior to banning.

Weekly Mail's banning was the third; *New Nation*, the 35,000-circulation, black-readership weekly, and *South*, The Cape Town-based, working-class newspaper, have both suffered three-month bans.

Since the press restrictions were made law in August 1987, official warnings have come thick and fast. Recipients have included a small Eastern Cape community newsletter, an academic journal and the organ of the anti-military conscription movement. The effect has been to provoke a nationwide 'Hands Off The Press' campaign, an international outcry and renewed determination by alternative newspapers and their teams of lawyers to find loopholes in the law. But it has also resulted in some inevitable pre-publication censorship; a three-month closure could spell financial defeat for any newspaper lacking large-scale economic backing.

South Africa's alternative press - a broad term loosely referring to a range of newspapers, news agencies, magazines and community, student, trade union and church publications - are distinguished from the mainstream press by their independence from major commercial interest groups.

Innovations in newspaper technology, which introduced desktop publishing and laser printing, brought the production process within the reach of small, under-capitalised groups.

The alternative press emerged partly in response to the growing monopolisation within the newspaper industry: four major corporations - Media Times Limited, the Argus Group, Perskor and Nasionale Pers - owned and controlled all the country's newspapers. They also emerged to challenge spreading state control; their commitment is to the provision of an alternative order -

social, political, economic and cultural.

Efforts have been made to extend that commitment to include newsroom politics. The first alternative paper, *Grassroots*, launched in Cape Town in 1980, deliberately set out to be an agent of political change, and its



Gagged but not giving in

advocacy journalism was a catalyst in local community organisation.

Today, *Grassroots* looks set to become another victim of Botha's offensive. One of the first newspapers to receive an official warning, it has had several editions banned and seized. And in the latest attack one of its journalists was shot by an unknown assailant and soon after her discharge from hospital was detained under state of emergency legislation. •
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