

# South Africa's New Era Dream Come True

Mandela is free.  
South Africa is on the  
verge of a new era.  
**Joe Slovo** discusses  
future prospects with  
*Martin Jacques*



Joe Slovo is general secretary of the South African Communist Party and a member of the national executive of the ANC. He was until recently chief of staff of the ANC's military wing. He was a practising barrister until he left the country in 1963. And he was married Ruth First until her assassination in 1982.

Many people realised something was going to happen at the beginning of this year, but were surprised by de Klerk's speech: how far it went and how much he gave. What do you see as the significance of his intervention and why did he make it when he did?

The pace has not been determined by de Klerk but rather by the accelerating internal and external pressures, which have made it impossible for the regime to continue ruling in the old way.

The initiatives are not the result of a sudden conversion by de Klerk on the road to Damascus: they are an attempt to cope with what we consider to be a pre-revolutionary crisis. He undoubtedly would like to emerge from this crisis with a package which would keep white privilege as intact as possible, particularly in the economic sphere.

But intentions are one thing and the objective results of ruling-class initiatives are quite another. So whatever de Klerk's intentions might be, the fact that he's been forced to adopt new means to achieve those intentions has also opened up new space for advance by the opposition forces.

**And what particular forces have come together during 1989 and early 1990, to push de Klerk finally into an act which went further than many people expected?**

It was a combination of growing mass activity over the past year or two, which repressive measures have failed to block, and the international pressures that have created a situation in which they are compelled to do something.

**When you say international pressures, what do you mean?**

Sanctions, isolation and so on.

**How important has that been?**

I think it's been very, very fundamental. And I think it's pretty obvious to all that it's had a most serious consequence for the economy.

**How close are formal negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the government?**

I believe they are closer than ever before, but they're by no means imminent or inevitable. Our preconditions for the start of negotiations, which were spelled out in the Harare Declaration and endorsed unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly, have only been partly met.

For example, the emergency remains in place as well as detention without trial and some media restrictions; there's the absence of an amnesty, there's am-



biguity about the return of exiles, many of our militants remain on death row, and there are still hundreds of political prisoners. In other words, I would say that the climate for negotiations is still murky.

**How quickly do you expect the situation to move over the next few months?**

I think again, that's not necessarily written in the stars. It depends very much on the acceleration of the kind of pressures which have brought de Klerk to this point, and for him to go beyond it requires, I believe, additional pressures.

**One of the key pressures has been on the South African economy, above all the lack of new investment by multinationals. Now, obviously one of the reasons, I take it, why de Klerk moved like he did, was to try and unfreeze that situation, to try and get that investment flowing again, so that South Africa isn't isolated within the international economic community in the way that it has been over the last period. Do you expect de Klerk's measures to have that effect, or do you think South Africa is so isolated within the international community that these moves are not going to buy de Klerk the kind of time which he clearly would like to have?**

The answer is a simple one: it depends



'There is no future for socialism if we separate it from democracy'



on whether the international community is taken in by these half-measures. If it isn't and the signs are that, apart from the usual response by Thatcher, the international community remains firm that much more has to be done, then of course it won't buy him the kind of time that he would like to purchase.

**De Klerk obviously represents some kind of reforming movement among the whites. Do you expect that to be the predominant element within the white community over the next period, or do you think it's much more unstable?**

Growing sections of the white community have moved towards a more realistic position compared to the kind of monolithic approach of the previous phase. But I would say that de Klerk, even if he has the will to go beyond a certain point, still faces obvious difficulties in taking his constituency with him. Because particularly within the police force, among the right-wing sections of the white population as represented by the Conservative Party, and by what are called the lunatic fringe of the right wing, his course towards more meaningful reform will certainly be obstructed.

But I believe that, on balance, the majority of whites are ready to go along with at least the kind of perspective

which de Klerk has placed before them. Of course, a well-organised minority of whites occupying key positions in the forces of repression in South Africa can play a larger role than their size suggests in obstructing a dramatic move forward.

**One of the difficulties facing the ANC over the next period is that while there is a new balance of political forces within the country, as you say, the coercive apparatus - the police, armed forces and so on - remain in the hands of the white regime and, I would guess, usually on the more right-wing side of that regime. This is unlike, say, the situation in Zimbabwe where, because of the military strength of Zanu and Zapu, the liberation movement enjoyed real power in this sphere too. That won't be the state of affairs in South Africa. That must constitute some kind of special problem.**

It undoubtedly constitutes a special problem. But I think we must also, in examining the balance of forces in South Africa, take into account the factor which was in a relative sense missing from the Zimbabwean situation, that is, the strength of the political forces on the ground; the organised trade-union movement, the massive strength of the mass democratic movement itself and the extremely high level

of political awareness among the majority of blacks.

And therefore, although one cannot dismiss the purely repressive factor, which we cannot in the immediate future expect to counterbalance through our own physical strength, the question of the power balance in the country is, compared to Zimbabwe, much more influenced by what has been the primary weapon in our struggle; which has not been the armed side of it, but rather the massive political upsurge.

Looking at the power which can be wielded by such a political upsurge, as exemplified by Eastern Europe, that kind of balance will not completely eliminate the disadvantage you referred to, but it will certainly dilute its impact. I think too, that we are living in a slightly different world at the moment, and it will not be as easy in the immediate future as it would have been a few years ago, for the repressive forces to unleash the kind of massacres which we witnessed at an earlier stage.

We must also bear in mind that the South African army is not a professional army. Only 7% of it is a permanent force and it consists of a cross-section of various classes and strata from among the white community itself, with the majority of the officer class coming from the middle sections

of the white community. They are subject to the same kinds of doubts and divisions as the community from which they come. And therefore one cannot assume that this armed force will, at the end of the day, act as a monolith.

Another important factor is the emergence of a growing proportion of black armed forces, both in the Bantustans and within the South African Defence Forces, and I think recent events have at least suggested, if not demonstrated, that the kind of reliance that could be placed in the previous period on the black armed forces is no longer as guaranteed as it was before. You have particularly in the Bantustans, like the Transkei and a few other smaller Bantustans, evidence of a shift away by the Bantustan administrations, which includes the armed forces, from acting as complete puppets of Pretoria.

**When you say that it would be much harder for this kind of armed reprisal to take place at the moment, I take it you have in mind firstly, the impact that would have in further isolating South Africa from the Western community in particular; and secondly, that it would stand in complete contrast, by and large, to the example of Eastern Europe, where, with the exception of Romania, everything has proceeded with extraordinary peacefulness in the face of extraordinary pressure.**

Yes. I think the thrust of the opposition movement will come from this mass of political pressure from the organised people. And it's not beyond the realm of possibility that in the end, we could succeed in what I would call 'doing a GDR' on de Klerk.

By the way, in his speeches, de Klerk actually referred to the upsets in Eastern Europe and he made the point in these words: that the surge in Eastern Europe demonstrated there is an irresistible tide towards freedom. If he's absorbed the lessons of that, he must be fully aware that a similar kind of irresistible tide could show itself in our country.

**What do you anticipate will be the reaction of other opposition forces, like Buthelezi and the so-called coloured NPs, to this new situation? Hitherto, they have occupied some middle ground between the ANC and the regime, but now the whole dynamics of the situation have been totally transformed. How would you expect these forces to react in the new circumstances?**

I suspect some of them will gravitate more and more towards ANC positions for a number of reasons. The ANC is demonstrably the primary actor in the unfolding drama and, without putting a fine edge to it, we can expect a growing gravitation towards us by those whose uppermost thought is to assure their position in the changing power structure.

In saying this, I do not want to dismiss the importance from our point of view of broadening the opposition against racism. We of course have to ensure that the search for unity does not dilute

the substance of our liberation objectives, but we can only welcome the process, which is beginning to show itself, of some of the forces which were part of the collaborationist constituency making noises of getting closer to the ANC.

**And you expect this process to accelerate now?**

I believe it will accelerate, because I think most of them recognise, if they didn't before, that there can be no solution without the ANC as the primary actor.

**Perhaps the unbanning of the ANC was anticipated, but more surprising was the unbanning of the South African Communist Party (SACP), not least because one of the strategies of the regime over such a long period has been to drive a wedge between the ANC and the SACP. How do you explain the decision to unban the party and what's its significance?**

It would have been extremely difficult for them to unban the ANC and not the party. The alliance between the ANC and the party is firmer than it has ever been. Mandela reiterated that point in no uncertain terms in the published documents which he submitted both to Botha and to de Klerk. In any case, if the alliance continues, which it undoubtedly will, it would have been virtually impossible for the regime to unban the ANC without unbanning the party, because of course the ANC would then have been in an illegal conspiracy.

The regime has also recognised that there is very little difference - in relation both to immediate aims and immediate post-apartheid objectives - between the ANC and the party. And that the party, to the extent that they suspected it was made up of a wild bunch of terrorists, has demonstrated its commitment to a truly democratic South Africa in the post-apartheid state.

**The ANC has become a brilliant exponent of exile politics but the circumstances are about to change enormously. The problems confronting the ANC will be those of a legal organisation conducting its struggle through manifold legal forms. That will mean a tremendous change in its culture and its outlook. What do you see as the main problems?**

We are obviously faced with some very serious reflections on the questions you raise. All one can do at this stage is reflect on the questions. With its unbanning, there is no doubt that the ANC will grow immensely in numbers, and the problem is how the organisation copes with growing so quickly while not diluting its perspectives. Because undoubtedly it will attract in the process all kinds of people with their own agenda.

The ANC is an inter-class organisation and those who begin to see which side their future bread will be buttered, will probably flock in droves to it. We also have to address the question of the dividing line between the ANC as a mass organisation and the huge force

**'The alliance between the ANC and the party is firmer than it has ever been'**



which has come to be known as the 'mass democratic movement', which by and large stands in support of the ANC. How these two sectors relate organisationally and politically is obviously a problem that will have to be tossed about. Then there is the tremendously powerful workers' constituency, expressed mainly in the organised trade-union movement, which certainly won't be prepared to sink its identity.

So all this suggests that the relationship between the ANC and the other social forces is going to need very careful examination. I think, too, that the coming situation suggests more than ever the need for a strong communist party as part of an alliance, but also with an independent life. Our input as a communist party has not been to manipulate the other organisations and certainly not to manipulate the ANC. Our input has been basically to ensure that the aspirations of the working people are protected in what has been, and what inevitably will be for some time, a multi-class alliance. If our party has made a contribution overall in the history of the alliance, it has been that we have assured the kind of ideological input which gave a militant edge to the national movement, and those problems are not going to disappear.

**The ANC historically has always had a very impressive commitment to a non-racial South Africa. To what extent will that come under pressure over the coming period, given the brutality of the white regime towards the black population?**

I have no doubt that when the transformation comes, the inherited race attitudes from the whites will not disappear, nor will the resentment and anger of the accumulated hurts which the blacks have suffered disappear. Of course the question is not whether we can expect an overnight transformation in the thinking of all people in South Africa in the light of the historic inheritance, it will depend upon the leadership which is provided by a movement which will hopefully continue to have the support of the black constituency.

**Moving from exile politics to legal politics also means moving from primarily a politics of opposition, to a politics of power and responsibility, and within the context of that power, making tactical decisions about how far to move at any given moment.**

I agree with what you are hinting at, that we will require a great deal of tactical finesse in dealing with a new situation in which the issue is no longer merely mobilising people for confrontation with the regime, but moving towards constructing a non-racial united democratic South Africa.

There is no single formula for assuring that we will not go wrong on any of these issues, because history does not work that way, but I believe we are sufficiently clear about where we are heading to be able to elaborate our tactical solutions in relation to some of the problems you refer to.

There is an extraordinary paradox which we can watch on television. If you look at Eastern Europe, communist parties everywhere are on the run. But when you look at the pictures of big demonstrations in South Africa, there is the banner of the **ANC** and more or less next to it is the banner of the SACP. Such a striking contrast in fortunes. What for you, as a communist, is the meaning of the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? What do they mean for the SACP?

The fundamental lesson is absolutely clear. There is no future for socialism if we separate it from democracy, and when one talks about democracy one talks about it not only in its political sense but economically, culturally, ensuring the participation to the fullest extent of each individual in society, the right for each individual to express themselves.

I believe our popularity on the ground in South Africa, at a time when communist parties seem to be going downhill in most other countries, is a reflection of our own revolutionary practice over quite a long period of time. I am not saying that we weren't partly responsible, in the international sense, for the kind of distortions which everybody is familiar with: the cult of the personality, the blind adherence at a certain stage to Soviet foreign policy and so on. But on the ground, in our relationships with social organisations inside the country, particularly with the **ANC** and the trade-union movement, we long ago moved away from the concept that the party has got a natural right to guide and has a monopoly of wisdom.

Do you see the South African economy under an **ANC** government being essentially a mixed economy for the foreseeable future?

I have no doubt. I think we must accept an historic truth, which was ignored in many of the socialist countries, that there is no Chinese wall between systems which succeed one another, that the whole process of moving towards new relations of production is one which has to take into account the very fundamental fact that the day after the revolution the economy is exactly the same as it was the day before. That the mass of the people, even those who have participated in the revolutionary process, are fundamentally no different, having been motivated in their daily life by incentives and values which have existed throughout their lifetime and been inherited from the past.

I don't believe you can pole-vault into socialism. One has to accept the need to go through a lengthy process of transformation, in which the ingredients of the previous order will not and cannot disappear overnight, and any attempt to make them disappear by edict or by law will lead to the kind of negative results we have witnessed.

It is not just a national problem, it is also an international problem. Paradoxically, an **ANC** government would be faced with some

of the same problems that the present South African government is confronted with in terms of the multinationals. Any government these days, particularly if it presides over a highly internationalised economy, has to work out a strategy which is going to allow it to live with the multinationals.

Let me put it this way. I do not believe that, after the transformation, the country can be run without the presence of a private sector as part of the economic structure, or that it can be run without an influx of international capital. The question really is whether the private sector or international capital are allowed to become the dominating force in guiding society towards the future or whether the dominating force is the state structure and an economy which is moving towards greater and greater egalitarianism.

Isn't it likely to be much more ambiguous than either one or the other? Even if it is moving in broadly a more socialistic direction, then there is still a degree of co-existence, with all the ambiguity that implies.

Yes, you have got to coexist with reality. The only question is whether one allows some of these realities to become more dominant than others, and I believe it is possible to live with these realities and at the same time take structured steps in the direction of socialism: structured steps towards creating conditions in which a socialist society will be on the agenda - which I don't believe it is at the moment.

An **ANC** government in the not-too-distant future will face very different circumstances from, say, a decade ago. Firstly, the Soviet Union is going to be in a completely different position. It is committed to ending its relative isolation and integrating itself with the international economy. Eastern Europe is already very different.

And secondly, the future of the Third-World socialist countries is uncertain because of these changes. So an **ANC** government is going to have to make its way, the old models don't offer themselves any more.

I agree with that. I think we will have, as we always have tried in the past, to find our solution in the context of current reality rather than looking to past or to existing models. I think perhaps one of the problems we will face in South Africa - in common with the overwhelming sector of humanity which is in the underdeveloped world - is the North-South divide.

Of course one welcomes the idea of a common European home, and closer collaboration between the industrial nations of the world, but we must not overlook the fact that in part the prosperity of the industrialised world, which includes both capitalist and, hopefully, future socialist governments, is based at least in part on the imbalance in the exploitation of resources, as between the advanced in-

dustrial world and the underdeveloped world. The underdeveloped world will have to examine how it will prevent this continuing.

**You are shifting the terrain of the discussion. You are arguing that we should not see an **ANC** government in terms of the capitalist-socialist polarity, but rather the North-South question. In that context, an **ANC**-led South Africa is going to have a profound impact on Africa.**

Yes, and I think an **ANC** South Africa which is stable and prosperous will play a very important role in counterbalancing the unequal relationship which exists at the moment between Africa as a continent and the industrial world. The role which Southern Africa will be able to play in at least ameliorating some of these imbalances is going to be enormous.

You see South Africa's future very much in North-South terms.

It is becoming more and more important for the underdeveloped world to come together, not in confrontation with the industrial world, but to examine its interests and how together they can prevent a situation in which the industrial North is able, by virtue of pure economic power, to manipulate resources to an even greater extent than before.

Before, you at least had competition between the capitalist world and the socialist world, and with that disappearing, which is a good thing for the future of humanity, it can, if there is no vigilance by the Third World, lead to further stagnation and even worse conditions for the underdeveloped world.

The opening-up of Eastern Europe could have a very deleterious effect on the Third World.

We have three blocs: the Americas, the common European home, and the Japan-oriented sector, and between them their economic power is frightening from the point of view of those societies that want to catch up.

To what extent has perestroika and a growing sense of internal preoccupation affected the Soviet Union's relationship with the **ANC**?

So far it has been completely unchanged. The support we have received from the Soviet Union in the past is continuing. Of course one cannot project too far into the future these days, given the changes taking place. The problems are bound to have an effect on the degree of attention which the Soviet Union can pay to its friends in the future.

I know from reading your pamphlet that you are very pro-Gorbachev. Are you an optimist about what is going to happen in the Soviet Union?

One cannot be certain that the Gorbachev process will succeed in all respects. One can only express the hope that it does.

**'We could succeed in what I would call "doing a GDR" on de Klerk'**

