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Observing the New South Africa

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OBSERVING THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

On April 4, the Monday after Easter, I boarded a plane from New York directly for South Africa, to join thousands of others who were privileged to witness the end of 40 years of apartheid in South Africa, and 400 years of white domination on the continent. Fourteen hours later we arrived at Jan Smuts airport, eager to join in the spirit of the new South Africa. I was whisked through customs - almost - when a customs official noticed that my visa had been withdrawn. The computer still listed me as one of those who not welcome in the old South Africa. It had not yet be re-programmed. However, the customs officials prevailed over the computer, and I was soon through customs and on my way.

The Church of the Brethren, my home denomination, and the National Council of Churches were my USA sponsoring bodies, and in South Africa I registered with the Ecumenical Monitoring Program in South Africa (EMPSA) as a monitor of the elections. For one week EMPSA oriented us in Johannesburg, the City of Gold. This week was a time of being introduced to the election and monitoring structures, the roles of monitors and observers, the Codes of Conduct for EMPSA, and the authority and responsibility of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Outside of these training sessions, we visited a crafts market on a Saturday morning and attended a Chris Hani Memorial service in Soweto.

After the crafts market visit on a Saturday morning, I walked to a restaurant in Hillbrow, for a cup of tea and to write a letter to my family. I had just finished the letter and sealed it, when I heard a bang and saw a half dozen patrons lying face down on the floor. Naively I got up and asked what the problem was. Then I noticed that three bullets had smashed through the plate glass window some eight feet behind me, narrowly missing those lying on the ground.

The next day I learned that a man standing guard with a shotgun at a hotel across the street had been asked to move; his weapon made people nervous. He got into his car, where he accidentally discharged the shotgun, blowing a hole some five inches in diameter through the metal side of the car and spraying the street with pellets. One pedestrian was injured, but not critically. I thought to myself, "Did I come all the way from Chicago for this?" Luckily, this was the closest I came to any direct experience of violence throughout the my EMPSA tour.

After our orientation, the EMPSA group, now some three hundred people from all over the world, was deployed to various parts of the country. I was assigned, with three other "internationals", to an area close to the city of Pietermaritzburg, a city some 45 miles west of Durban. Our group consisted of a woman from the Netherlands, one from Germany, a man from Kenya and myself, plus a local coordinator, with a base at a small retreat center just outside Howick.

The EMPSA mandate was three fold: to monitor the violence, the political transformation of the country's political institutions, and the elections themselves. Although there were thousands of international observers and monitors throughout the country - the UN, the European Union, the Organization of African Unity, etc. - the election process was clearly in the hands of the South Africans themselves. And this was a matter of pride: If we mess up, they said, we do not want the opportunity to blame others; we want to take on this responsibility ourselves and learn even as we go.

Our first task in the Howick area was to introduce ourselves to the various players in the election process. Since no major political rallies were planned during the two weeks prior to the election, we visited police stations and met the station commanders; we spoke to the district electoral officers responsible for the machinery of the elections themselves; we interviewed some political representatives of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom party (IFP), the major parties in the area, as well as the chief rivals for the allegiance of the people in Natal.

Tremendous uncertainty and fear pervaded the area until about a week before the elections (April 26, 27, and 28), since the IFP had refused to participate in the election. Many of the rural communities were divided between the ANC and the IFP - though no one knew for certain the strength of the two parties - and much violence had been fomented over the past four years by "third party" forces; free and fair elections without IFP's participation were impossible. In the Durban area, a number of young people doing voter education in the townships were found tortured and chopped to death; simply encouraging people to vote risked attack and death. Pastors and ministers in Kwa Zulu feared putting up posters that were as impartial and innocent as possible, while still encouraging people to vote; supporting the election was the equivalent of an anti-IFP position.

Nottingham Road, a small town with only one road through it, illustrated how "white areas" might be staging grounds for violent clashes between ANC and IFP supporters. On one side of the main road was the voting station (in the Farmers' Association hall); on the other was the railroad. The voting station was hemmed in. Without IFP participation, ANC voters from surrounding villages such as Impendle would undoubtedly have come in to the "white" town to cast their vote, followed by IFP supporters intent on stopping the process. A bloodbath was sure to occur.

But the IFP was persuaded to join the elections on April 17, and feverishly campaigned for some seven or eight days. The climate change was palpable. Voting station personnel expressed great relief: presiding officers, IEC monitors and observers, the police. Several IFP representatives greeted us with smiles and Zulu language lessons, a marked contrast with the hostility afforded us in earlier meetings.

During the elections, our EMPSA group drove from voting station to voting station, to observe the elections. The most moving experiences were observing the elderly, on Tuesday the 26th, hobbling, shuffling, even carried in on wheelbarrows, determined to vote. On Wednesday, the 27th, thousands lined up early on, forming lines more than a mile long. In Hilton, those who arrived at 7:00 a.m., waited three hours to vote. Those who arrived at 9:00 a.m., waited six hours. Everyone was decidedly patient, and many, many times people from all parties and races - Black, white, Indian, and so-called Colored - engaged each other in conversation.

People were not only intent on voting. They were intent on peace. Many election personnel were grateful for the peace and quiet on the special election day, but feared the youth who would come out toyi-toying as they voted. This fear never materialized. The vote was what the people were committed to, not to provocative acts.

For the majority Black population, the act of voting was a clear expression of their humanity: "Now I am a human being." And for the whites, this was their first experience of voting without shame. As one widely respected journalist, Allistar Sparks, put it: "It was...a sense of personal liberation. For blacks, liberation from oppression; for whites, liberation from guilt."

Although a number of counting delays and charges of fraud, horsetrading, disputed ballots, lost ballots, and so on, followed the elections, the IEC declared the elections substantially free and fair, significantly reflecting the will of the people. Nelson Mandela, the country's first truly representative president, for over a generation the personification of the suffering and struggle of the people, became the symbol of national reconciliation and nation building. As one person said, "If Mandela can forgive, who dares nurture hate?"

After the election, I spent several days in King Williams Town (the home of Steve Biko and the site of a massacre of twenty nine people just two years ago), with old friends. I told one of them how privileged I was to observe this historic moment with him. But, I said, I was even happier he was alive to see this day. I was quickly informed of an assassination attempt on his life only a month earlier. Apartheid will die slowly in the spirits of some people; the question is how irreversibly the structures have been undermined.

The most poignant story of the entire period came from a small town, Knysna. A police dog began snarling and snapping at a long line of black voters. The dog's handler, a police officer, showing signs of growing embarrassment as he tried to silence the vicious animal, eventually apologized to the black voter: "I'm sorry," he said, "but he was trained in the old South Africa and we haven't had time to retrain him yet."

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