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FM CAPE TOWN

TO PRIORITY FCO

TELNO 121

OF 121530Z MARCH 87

INFO ROUTINE PRETORIA, JOHANNESBURG, HARARE, LUSAKA, WASHINGTON

INFO ROUTINE UKMIS NEW YORK

INFO SAVING CAPE TOWN CONSULATE, DURBAN

MY TELNO 40: SOUTH AFRICA: THE ELECTION SCENE

SUMMARY

1. GOVERNMENT CERTAIN TO BE RE-ELECTED, BUT UNCLEAR YET WHAT INROADS PARTIES TO LEFT AND RIGHT WILL MAKE. POSSIBLE REALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL FORCES AFTER ELECTION IF BOTH LEFT AND RIGHT DO WELL AGAINST NATIONAL PARTY. ELECTION RESULTS MAY AFFECT PROSPECTS FOR PRESIDENT BOTHA'S RETIREMENT AND SUCCESSION.

DETAIL

2. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS GOT OFF TO A BRISK START. BUT THERE ARE NEARLY TWO MONTHS STILL TO GO. IT IS MORE OF A MARATHON THAN A SPRINT FOR POLITICAL PARTIES AND VOTERS.

3. THE ONE NEAR CERTAINTY IS THAT THE NATIONAL PARTY WILL BE RE-ELECTED WITH AN OVERALL MAJORITY. THE BIG QUESTION, TO WHICH THERE IS NO CLEAR ANSWER AT PRESENT, IS WHETHER THE RIGHT OR LEFT-WING WILL MAKE THE DEEPER INROADS. PUBLICATION OF OPINION POLLS IS PROHIBITED AFTER NOMINATION DAY, 31 MARCH. NO CURRENT POLLS HAVE APPEARED RECENTLY, BUT THE MEDIA ARE KNOWN TO BE CONDUCTING SURVEYS FOR PUBLICATION LATER THIS MONTH. THESE MAY GIVE THE FIRST RELIABLE SIGNS OF ANY TRENDS.

4. THE CHALLENGE FROM INDEPENDENTS AND FROM DISSIDENT AFRIKANER INTELLECTUALS HAS CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING PRESS AND OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE. BUT IT IS EARLY DAYS. THE AFRIKANER PRESS IS GENERALLY LOYAL TO THE NATIONAL PARTY (NP). TELEVISION IS GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED. THE NP CAMPAIGN HAS NOT YET REACHED FULL PITCH. THE STRENGTH OF THE RIGHT-WING PARTIES IS STILL SOMETHING OF AN ENIGMA AND HAS PERHAPS RECEIVED LESS ATTENTION TILL NOW.

5. I CONTINUE TO HEAR FROM MINISTERS THAT THE GOVERNMENT THEMSELVES SEE THE RIGHT-WING THREAT AS MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE LEFT (THEIR OVERRIDING CONCERN IN MY VIEW BEING TO KEEP THE AFRIKANER COMMUNITY TOGETHER TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT). DISSIDENTS ON THE LEFTWARD SIDE OF THE NATIONAL PARTY MAY END BY ABSTAINING RATHER THAN VOTING FOR THE PFP WHICH IS PROFOUNDLY DISTRUSTED BY MOST AFRIKANERS. IF PREVIOUS ELECTIONS ARE ANYTHING TO GO BY, A GOOD MANY WAVERERS MAY COME BACK INTO THE NP FOLD IN THE LAST DAYS BEFORE POLLING (6 MAY).

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6. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE OUTCOME MAY NOT BE SO DIFFERENT FROM PRESENT PARTY STRENGTHS IN PARLIAMENT, OTHER THAN THE NATIONAL PARTY ENDING UP WITH A SLIGHTLY REDUCED MAJORITY. A SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED MAJORITY WOULD COME ABOUT IN ONE OF 3 WAYS:

(A) THE TWO RIGHT-WING PARTIES MIGHT EMERGE WITH A COMBINED STRENGTH GREATER THAN THE PFP, LEAVING THE WAY OPEN FOR A UNITED RIGHT-WING PARTY TO TAKE OVER AS OFFICIAL OPPOSITION. THIS WOULD PUT A SEVERE BRAKE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO MOVE FORWARD AGAIN OVER REFORM. THE REFORMIST ELEMENT WITHIN THE NATIONAL PARTY WOULD EMERGE DISCREDITED AND DISHEARTENED, IN NO POSITION TO LEVER THE GOVERNMENT TOWARDS FURTHER CHANGE.

(B) THE PFP AND THEIR JUNIOR PARTNERS, THE NRP, MIGHT INCREASE THEIR NUMBERS IN PARLIAMENT AND, TOGETHER WITH ONE OR TWO INDEPENDENTS, WIN CONSIDERABLY MORE SEATS THAN THE RIGHT. THIS COULD ENCOURAGE THE GOVERNMENT TO PURSUE REFORMS ALBEIT CAUTIOUSLY. IT WOULD ALSO GIVE HEART TO THE REFORMIST WING WITHIN THE NATIONAL PARTY TO CONTINUE PRESSING THE GOVERNMENT FORWARD, DESPITE IT BEING AN UPHILL STRUGGLE.

(C) BOTH LEFT AND RIGHT MIGHT SCORE AT THE EXPENSE OF THE NATIONAL PARTY, THUS PUTTING THE GOVERNMENT UNDER DOUBLE PRESSURE AFTER THE ELECTION. CENTRIFUGAL FORCES ALREADY AT WORK IN THE NATIONAL PARTY WOULD BE ACCENTUATED. UNABLE TO SATISFY BOTH TENDENCIES IN REGARD TO POLICIES, THE NATIONAL PARTY COULD THEN FIND ITSELF LOSING SOME OF ITS PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTH AT EITHER END OF THE SPECTRUM.

7. AT THIS STAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN, ANY OF THE ABOVE SCENARIOS IS POSSIBLE, ALTHOUGH IN THE ABSENCE OF A RIGHT-WING ELECTORAL PACT THE FIRST LOOKS LEAST LIKELY. I BELIEVE THAT ONLY SUBSTANTIAL LOSSES ON BOTH WINGS OF THE NATIONAL PARTY WOULD BE ENOUGH TO CREATE THE MOMENTUM FOR A REALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL FORCES TOWARDS A NEW MIDDLE GROUND LEFT OF CENTRE, ABOUT WHICH EGLIN (PFP) AND WORRALL (INDEPENDENT) HAVE SPOKEN. GAINS BY THE PFP AND THEIR ALLIES MIGHT NOT BY THEMSELVES CAUSE SIGNIFICANT DEFECTIONS OF NP MEMBERS WHOSE HEARTS WOULD STILL BE WITH THE AFRIKANER MAJORITY.

8. EGLIN SAID TO ME LAST WEEK THAT WORRALL WAS IMPORTANT NOT SO MUCH FOR OPENING UP ISSUES AS FOR SHAKING OUT THE REFORMIST WING OF THE NATIONAL PARTY. HOWEVER ONE SHOULD NOT OVERESTIMATE THIS TREND. ALTHOUGH 25 TO 30 NP MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT MAY SHARE THE WISH FOR A NEW AGENDA, PERHAPS NO MORE THAN 10 OR 12 OF THEM AT MOST WOULD BE WILLING TO CROSS THE FLOOR AND JOIN A NEW PARTY OR GROUP. ANY GROUPING TO THE LEFT OF CENTRE WOULD BE TOO SMALL TO FORM A GOVERNMENT. THE DEPARTURE OF NP "LIBERALS" WOULD DRIVE THE REST OF THE PARTY RIGHTWARDS, POSSIBLY TO MAKE COMMON CAUSE WITH THE CONSERVATIVES ON THE EXTREME RIGHT. EVEN IF THE NP LOST SEATS TO BOTH LEFT AND RIGHT, A COMBINED OPPOSITION WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO OUTNUMBER THE GOVERNMENT.

9. PIK BOTHA IS THE ONE FIGURE OF STATURE IN THE NATIONAL PARTY CAPABLE OF BRINGING A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF BACK-BENCHERS WITH

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HIM IF HE JOINED A NEW GROUPING. BUT WHAT HE WANTS IS TO LEAD THE NATIONAL PARTY ITSELF. ONLY IF A MASSIVE SPLIT WERE IMMINENT WOULD I SEE HIM LEAVING. IN ANY CASE HE WILL STAY SO LONG AS HE SEES A CHANCE OF SUCCEEDING P W BOTHA: AT PRESENT UNLIKELY, BUT NOT INCONCEIVABLE IF OTHER CONTENDERS FOR THE SUCCESSION WERE TO FARE BADLY OR THE PARTY ITSELF ENTERED A PERIOD OF UNPRECEDENTED UPHEAVAL.

10. ALL ACCOUNTS AGREE THAT PRESIDENT BOTHA NOW RELIES ON AN INNER CIRCLE OF ADVISERS. AFRIKANER BUSINESSMEN FOR INSTANCE WHO USED TO HAVE ACCESS TO HIM NO LONGER DO SO. THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF FINANCE TOLD ME THE OTHER DAY THAT P W BOTHA HAD ACHIEVED ALMOST ALL HE COULD, AND THAT THERE WOULD BE LITTLE FURTHER CHANGE UNTIL HE STEPPED DOWN. ACCORDING TO ONE OF THE PRESIDENT'S CLOSEST MINISTERIAL COLLEAGUES, SCHLEBUSCH, WHO ACTS AS UNOFFICIAL VICE PRESIDENT, P W BOTHA WANTS TO STAY FOR UP TO ANOTHER 2 YEARS, NOT LEAST TO ALLOW TIME FOR THE SUCCESSION TO BE SORTED OUT WITHOUT DAMAGING THE NATIONAL PARTY. A BAD ELECTION RESULT WOULD NEVERTHELESS INCREASE THE PRESSURE ON HIM TO RETIRE.

11. MUCH WILL DEPEND ON HOW THE TWO FRONT-RUNNERS, HEUNIS AND DE KLERK (MY TELNO 570 OF 1986) FARE PERSONALLY IN THE ELECTION. HEUNIS FACES A CHALLENGE FROM WORRALL OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S REFORM PROGRAMME, WHILE DE KLERK'S FORTUNES ARE BOUND UP WITH NP SUCCESS IN FENDING OFF THE RIGHT-WING CHALLENGE IN TRANSVAAL. A WEAK SHOWING BY EITHER OF THEM WOULD DAMAGE THEIR CHANCES OF LEADING THE PARTY. A DEFEAT WOULD ELIMINATE THEM.

12. LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD (AS SOME POLITICIANS ARE ALREADY DOING) A GENERAL ELECTION FOR ALL THREE HOUSES IS DUE IN 1989. IN THEORY THE GOVERNMENT COULD POSTPONE THIS ON THE STRENGTH OF A SIMPLE MAJORITY VOTE IN EACH HOUSE. ON BALANCE I DOUBT WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT WOULD RISK SUCH A DAMAGING ADMISSION OF HAVING LOST THEIR NERVE. BUT IT WILL REMAIN AN OPTION ONCE THE PRESENT ELECTION IS OUT OF THE WAY.

13. SEE MY TELNO 123 (NOT TO ALL) FOR LATEST DEVELOPMENTS OVER THE RIGHT-WING PARTIES.

MOBERLY

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