Internal and external pressure to negotiate in South Africa

An interview with Roelf Meyer

Roelf Meyer was the National Party government’s chief negotiator during the transition from apartheid. After 1994 he continued in the portfolio of Constitutional Affairs in the Cabinet of President Nelson Mandela. He is now a business person and a consultant on peace processes.

In what ways did sanctions and pressure on the South African government contribute towards the negotiations process that began in 1990?

The decision to embark on a process of a negotiated settlement by the leaders on both sides of the divide resulted from various pressures and incentives that happened over time.

Pressure began to build up in the 1980s. In the early part of the decade the National Party (NP) government sent some signals that it was ready to offer concessions, but there was no serious intention to dismantle apartheid or even tamper with the central tenets of apartheid ideology. Policies to pacify ‘moderate’ coloured, Indian and black communities and leaders were introduced, but President P.W. Botha steadfastly refused to talk with any of the genuine black leaders such as the African National Congress (ANC).

Externally, the United Nations decided on punitive measures towards the country. International sanctions were activated in the fields of finance, trade, industry, sport, media and communications, not only by the UN but also bilaterally by South Africa’s main trading and economic partners. By the mid-1980s many of the world’s largest companies had divested from South Africa.

Internally, unrest was increasing and grassroots resistance organizations began to emerge in the black townships, while increasingly militant student protests triggered new waves of turmoil and violence. By 1985 the situation inside the country had reached crisis point with uprisings, strikes, boycotts and armed resistance reaching unprecedented levels. Reform-orientated groups and the media started to call for a new approach to solve the escalating tension.

How did Botha’s government respond to this combination of pressures?

In response to what he called the “total onslaught” against the apartheid regime, Botha followed a “total
strategy,” which sought to remove the reasons for unrest by providing social relief in order to pacify the anger of the black majority while overlooking their political aspirations and rights. The army was mobilized to help put down the protests in the townships and Botha declared a state of emergency in certain parts of the country. He had a great belief in the primacy of the military ahead of other government institutions and he deployed it to provide the social “back-up” where other government departments failed to deliver services in the black areas.

In August 1985 he made a speech in Durban in which many expected he would announce major reforms in apartheid policies, but in fact he used it to tell the world that his government would not submit to any pressure from inside or outside the country, and would go it alone if necessary. He was still not prepared to open negotiations with those representing the majority of the black community. To Nelson Mandela and others who were still imprisoned his condition was simple: they had to renounce violence before negotiations could begin.

However, around this period the government started very secret meetings with Mandela, who had nearly 50 encounters with government representatives by 1990. For Mandela, the process of talking secretly with the government could have drawn condemnation from the rest of the ANC leadership, but it seems he wanted to convince Botha that the ANC was not a wild-eyed terrorist movement.

Meanwhile, violence continued to spread and Botha declared a nation-wide state of emergency in June 1986 with more draconian powers than the one before. In response the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed to mobilize all ANC supporters who were not imprisoned or in exile. Their strategy to make the country ungovernable was very effective and the government’s security forces were stretched in their capacity to contain the unrest. This became the worst period of the apartheid years through escalated violence by and against the state, but there was also active engagement by prominent South Africans like Archbishop Desmond Tutu who fought apartheid from a moral basis. They did so not only inside the country but also in the international arena.

**What kind of an impact did external pressure make on the country?**

In the latter half of the 1980s the pressure was really felt. Even South Africa’s closest economic partners were abandoning it. The USA, for instance, instituted a wide-ranging sanctions bill during 1986 which had a major effect on all US companies who remained in South Africa. Their forced withdrawal from the South African economy, together with new pressures from multilateral institutions, had a significant negative impact on the economy, which was more dependent on international trade and investment than now.

The sports sanctions can’t be underestimated either – South Africans are mad about sport and sanctions had a major impact on the psyche of the whites in South Africa.

**How did this build up of pressure influence key decision-makers?**

South Africa was ostracized, and as a result the business community started to mobilize to influence the government to engage in a process of change. Public discussions and debates in business circles were now focusing on how the country could be changed. One such exercise was a scenario-planning model called the ‘high road / low road scenario’ (ie negotiation leading to a political settlement versus confrontation leading to civil war) that was publicly promoted and sponsored by Anglo American through Clem Sunter. From personal experience I can say it had a major impact when it was
presented to government representatives, including F.W. De Klerk.

Academics, religious leaders and civil society who were part of the ‘establishment’ also began to question apartheid policies and some became very active in pressuring for change. The Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa, formed by then ex-opposition political leader Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, engaged in talks with ANC leaders in exile outside the country. This led to huge consternation.

Closer allies of the government started to raise their voices too. The Afrikaner Broederbond (Afrikaner brotherhood), which was for decades believed to be one of the most influential instruments behind apartheid, started to advocate change openly through their leader, Pieter de Lange. The same happened with some church leaders like Johan Heyns, moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church which was by many seen as ‘the church behind apartheid.’

Whilst the vast majority of the government saw the need for change, Botha resisted. But in February 1989 he suffered a stroke and stepped down as NP leader. F.W. De Klerk, who was never part of Botha’s inner circle, was elected in his place as party leader and started to prepare himself to take over as president. Despite being viewed as conservative he immediately engaged in talks with reformists in the country and abroad to seek advice and plan his leadership. Any of the candidates to succeed Botha would have done the same.

De Klerk was a civilian, a democrat and a pragmatist who understood the need for change. On 2 February 1990 he made a speech in parliament to announce the unbanning of all political organizations and the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. This surprise announcement had the required dramatic impact to force all concerned to accept that there was a new way forward. There were no conditions attached, which forced everybody to accept that the way forward was through negotiations.

**Was the potential lifting of sanctions and isolation an incentive to change?**

Yes, De Klerk expected South Africa to reap the rewards of this change, and in the build-up to the decision he engaged with world leaders who promised him success if South Africa would go that route. One of those who influenced the decision of De Klerk very positively was the UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher who had pursued a controversial policy of constructive engagement with South Africa, and her encouragement was undoubtedly a major incentive to act. De Klerk met at least twice with her during the period he was party leader before he became President. She basically told him he better get his act together – you could call it pressure of a constructive and positive nature. The role the then British Ambassador, Robin Renwick, played was enormously significant in conveying messages to the South African government on behalf of the British government.

**Was pressure on South Africa sustained after Mandela’s release? The ANC called for the continuation of sanctions until there was proof that the process of change was ‘irreversible.’**

From my experience, the moment Mandela was released we started to feel the relief, and from this point international actors largely left us to carry on the process by ourselves. Some sanctions continued, but not to the same extent in terms of their effect. There was a gradual lifting of sanctions through the early 1990s as it became clear to the ANC that the longer South Africa suffered, there would be more longer-term implications.

I can’t say what the ANC’s assessment of sanctions was, but from our perspective it was more important to ensure there was progress towards a negotiated settlement. In reality the process became irreversible the day Mandela was let out of prison. There was no way he could go back into prison. The question was how we could succeed reaching a negotiated settlement.

What you must understand is that the South African government felt much greater pressure on the subject of controlling the political violence inside the country than from pressure from outside. The main concern right from the beginning was whole question of the armed struggle and how to get the negotiations process started, which took a long time. The first meeting between us was in May 1990 and we only started the multi-party process at the end of 1991. So there was a long process of ‘talks about talks’ and pre-negotiations.

**Did international actors play roles in supporting the unfolding peace process?**

Of course there were interventions from time to time, but none of those had a further, specific impact on the negotiations process that we started to follow. The influence was through diplomatic channels, in a friendly way, rather than pressure. Of course, at the time everyone wanted to see Mandela and he wanted to establish relations. But De Klerk was also a popular guest internationally as the man who started to dismantle apartheid, which helped bring some relief. It was all part of the diplomatic process of getting the
parties to come to agreement. For example, when the negotiations broke down in 1992, when I was Minister of Constitutional Affairs, my ANC counterpart Cyril Ramaphosa and I tried to move the process forward and we engaged with some international figures to try to get them to make a telephone call to get the process moving. Pik Botha and I went to see the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and we spoke to him about our frustrations with developments, so that he could make some phone calls and help get the process on track. That was the kind of diplomatic influence that played a role periodically. The same year a delegation led by Cyrus Vance came to South Africa, which reflected international concern about the political violence and the lack of progress with the constitutional negotiations process.

Another example of the type of interaction we had is from much later, a few weeks before the elections of 1994, when a group of international individuals led by Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington came to South Africa in the hope that they could use their influence and create space for the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) to come on board – the IFP hadn’t participated in negotiations for almost a year and now everything was in place, the negotiations completed and the interim constitution passed through parliament. When this group arrived they immediately had a series of meetings, including with me, and I made it very clear there was no chance that we were going to create space by postponing the electoral process, which would only lead to mass mobilization and bloodshed. They were taken aback but phoned me the next day and admitted our assessment was perfectly correct, and they were packing their bags and leaving. The Kenyan representative stayed behind and met the IFP leadership and told them the only option was to participate in the election, and ultimately the ballot paper was amended and they did.

**During the actual negotiating processes, though, was international influence useful in breaking impasses?**

To some extent, but in reality we reached the main breakthroughs ourselves. The critical moment in the whole transition was the breakdown of negotiations in 1992. The constitutional negotiation process got going at the end of 1991 – what became known as the Codesa process – and went on for a number of months in specific working groups on specific subjects, but it became clear during that era that the government and the ANC did not have reconcilable objectives. I realized later on – I certainly didn’t have the insight at that point in time – that in that whole period to June 1992, the NP was very much in the mindset of the old paradigm, which was about protection of the white minority through holding governmental power, whereas for the ANC the constitutional talks were about securing as much power as possible.

Then came the collapse in the negotiations: first the multilateral negotiations came to a halt in May 1992, then a month later the ANC called off bilateral negotiations because of the Boipatong massacre, for which they held the government responsible. Obviously that was a way of putting pressure on us publicly, but I have no doubt that the underlying factor was that they knew that the NP were not on the same page as them with regard to the objective of negotiations.

We were all very concerned about the breakdown, but Cyril and I started to engage in a bilateral dialogue process, commonly called the ‘channel bilateral,’ and we very quickly hit upon the problem. What we talked about in the following few months led to the Record of Understanding signed between Mandela and De Klerk at the end of September, the essence of which was the establishment of the new South Africa. It was the settlement, from there onwards it was filling in the detail, despite the fact that it took us another three years.

Crucially, it was in that three months that we succeeded in changing the old paradigm. We started to ask what it was that we wanted for the future – in terms of a new constitution for the country – instead of what we wanted to protect from the past. The major shift in that period in thinking was to respect individual rights instead of minority protection: how do we safeguard the individual instead of how do we safeguard minorities? Once we had agreed on that, we could talk about a democracy with equal individual rights for all. That was the essence of that breakthrough.

Of course we didn’t call it a ‘paradigm shift’ at the time, and I’m not suggesting this shift took place in the minds of everyone concerned, but there was sufficient understanding in the NP leadership to suddenly start looking at the bigger picture, the wider framework, instead of dealing with specific aspects. The ANC had their own paradigm shift too. Their decisions were still informed by the Harare Declaration of August 1989, which essentially called for an immediate dismantling of the apartheid government and a new interim government, without sufficient opportunity to balance the requirements of the South African people. Instead we ended up with long negotiations to 1994 followed by another two years of negotiations. So both sides made shifts to reach a sustainable settlement – the security forces would not have accepted the transition if this hadn’t happened.